The Lullaby of the Labyrinth

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The Lullaby of the Labyrinth

by FriendlyNonMurderingSort

Summary

Trapped in an anything-but-mundane cycle, William Graham, FBI detective extraordinaire, finds his mind failing him more and more as time passes. He is faced with those who truly wish to help him, and those who only wish to use him, but he cannot discern who falls into what category.
During a dream that seems all too real, Will is taken deep into the forest where he encounters the faun, Elnias. Elnias tells Will the tale of the dead Prince Ruvyn, and that Will is the reincarnation of his eternal soul. Should Will complete three grueling tasks before the moon is full, he will be able to retake his throne and reclaim immortality.

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“It only takes one drop of blood?” Will asked. He looked up at Elnias for confirmation. Should his throat be slit right then and there, Will was not sure if he would be upset or relieved.
“Only one,” Elnias assured.
Elnias held out his palm, and Will was too willing to offer up his own.
Elnias used one of his long claws, and pricked Will’s finger. Blood welled to the surface, but it was no worse than having his blood sugar tested at a hospital.
Elnias turned over Will’s hand, and they both watched as the drop fell and hit the page of the open book.

Notes

Am I too late to get on this whole Hannigram train?

See the end of the work for more notes

A Long, Long Time Ago

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Blood red banners fell from the ceiling in waterfalls, cascading over mantles of gold and silver. The fabric was heavy and dense, but not weighed down. In the center of each banner, proudly displayed, was the crest of the royal family. It was borne there for all to see, and to remember just whom it was that they belonged to. The crest was regal, and royal by all definitions of the word. All of the patterns were hand-embroidered, as there were no machines to perform the task for someone. The sweeping lines told of the sophistication of the royal family.

The whole room—no, it was better described as the grandest of auditoriums—was haloed in blinding yellow light. All harsh edges, if there were any, were blurred by the soft light, and everything was seamlessly crafted into one being under its glow. Objects that were brilliant before, radiated with a luminosity that was unseen by normal humans.

Laid out along the floor of the center of the hall, a burgundy carpet as though it had been soaked in the richest of wines. The plush cloth led to three vast and enormous thrones. Each was at the same height, and each was made of the same glittering gold that the entire cavernous room was made from. All three thrones were adorned with precious jewels; emeralds, rubies, diamonds and sapphires, all smoothed over and glistening with dew. One throne for the king, queen, and prince respectively.

Upon the leftmost throne sat the queen, a woman as tall as she was beautiful. She towered over any ordinary human, for she was anything but an ordinary human. The queen was outshining the mundane with a power and grace unknown. Her hair fell in long brown tresses, accentuating her high cheekbones and her pointed chin. Her skin was of the finest porcelain, and her eyes shone like sapphires. The queen's dress was long enough to drape her entire body and fall to the floor beneath her throne. The gossamer she wore caught the light like a rainbow, complimented by her own eternal internal beauty projecting forward for all to see.

In the middle throne, sat the king. He was as tall as his queen, and unlike any other king. His features were strong but gentle and loving. He smiled from pointed ear to pointed ear, generous and benevolent. His long cape sat under him, just as long as the queen’s dress. He wore only gold, with a single red jewel in the center of his heavy and pointed crown.

Will stared up at the two elegant creatures, finding himself at a loss for words. His feet bade him approach, and he did so with a grace that he had never had before. Will’s shoulders bore a heavy cloak, but he did not notice the weight. He walked with his chin held high, unafraid to look upon the royal beauties beaming down at him.

Will dared to glance down at his toes, and found himself in the same chiffon that the queen and king wore, patterned with delicate flowers blooming gently from their stems and leaves. His feet were bare, and the crimson carpet under his toes was as soft as the silk woven from a

cloud. Will sensed that he was gliding across the material, pulled by an invisible string, rather than walking of his own accord.

As he reached the base of the king's throne, another creature—much closer to a monster—wove around the gold like a snake. It stood out like the worst eyesore. Its entire, gigantic body was as black as a moonless. It stood at nearly the height of half the throne, with knees bent and neck craned forward. The monster swept its arms out in a fluid motion, denying the awkward boniness of its body.

Will tipped his head to the monster, and it bowed nearly in half to him.

The black monster bent forward, reaching for an intricate box strapped to its body. When the box was opened, tiny creatures flew out of it. Their skin bore brilliant colors the likes of which Will had never seen. He let his eyes wander, to follow the strange fairies as they danced away like ice skaters moving through the air.

When Will's eyes returned to the creature, its head was no longer bowed and Will had to strain his neck back to look into the inky eyes that he was met with. Despite being dark, like a pool of tar waiting to suck him in, the light in the monster's eyes was gleeful. It was happy to see Will, just as the king and queen were.

From its filigreed box, the monster had produced a woven crown. Distracted by the vibrant fairies, Will did not notice it right away. The crown was made of leaves, finer than the kind that the king and queen wore. Will was royalty, but he was not at the status of his parents.

The monster stepped forward on behemoth hooves, and Will expected each hoof to clatter down with the monster's weight. Rather, the steps were light and frail, as if the mammoth in front of Will weighed only as much as a twig.

Its arms rose above Will's head, and he gave himself the chance to look at the beast in all of its glory.

At first glance, it was a mighty stag. Ten feet tall with antlers that sprung forth from the sides of its pitch black, furred head. The antlers easily had one hundred points each, towering three feet more into the sky. Will could not imagine the age and wisdom of this monster. The chest was broad and deep, leading to a thin waist and just as thin hips. Spindly legs as long as Will was tall gave way to the massive hooves.

Upon second glance, the black stag was decorated in feathers. Plumage ranging from a few inches along its cheeks, to a foot long across its spine. Will wanted to reach out and stroke each of the feathers between his fingers, but he held his ground and forced himself to take in the monster's grandeur.

Will had not realized until there was an eruption of cheering that the monster had placed the golden crown on his head. It rested on top of his mess of brown curls, pressing some into his eyes. Will looked around the immense hall, taking in the sight of rows and rows of seats that exploded with life. Creatures that ranged in size and appearance jumped, clapped, and screamed, all for Will.

He was brought back to reality when fragile claws swept across his forehead and pushed aside the hair that had settled there.

Will's blue eyes locked onto the monster's eyes. He thought they were black, but now that he was closer, Will could see the dark maroon that misled him. The playful glint sparkled more fiercely the closer the monster was to Will.

"We have long awaited your return," the monster said. Will could gather immediately that this monster was a man, wizened dissimilar to the other seemingly immortal beings that surrounded Will. They had yet to cease their cheering. "My prince, please take your throne," the monster encouraged. His voice was deep and laced with an accent like wine, one that Will would gladly become drunk from.

With an all-embracing motion, the monster pointed Will in the direction of his throne. Immediately, but only for an instant, Will wondered how he would scale the massive throne. Only when he was suddenly seated on top of it, looking down at the monster below him—who wore an affectionate smile—did Will understand that it didn't matter.

To his right, the king and queen sat on their own thrones. Will was not sure that he was sophisticated enough to sit beside these inhuman gods, but he held his ground. There was no sense in turning away from something that he had been invited to.

The creatures cheered for a while longer, until their prince had settled himself completely. If he thought about it, Will could feel the featherweight of the crown on top of his head. It was not a nuisance, but he was nowhere near used to the feeling. It felt strange, yet stranger still was the black, feathered stag that stood below him, with eyes only for Will. He felt he was undeserving of the stag's attention, but he soaked it up like a plant dying for water.

Will looked around the hall, taking it in from his new vantage point. He knew that he was powerful. It was a feeling imbued into his very bones. His mother and father, the queen and king, were ever proud of him. Below, the stag was nearly in tears with joy.

"This," the king said, calling out to his people, "is a day to be remembered." With only one word, the entire gathering had fallen completely silent. The king did not raise his voice, but he was loud enough to be heard from the very entrance of the hall.

The dancing, colorful fairies the stag had released moments earlier snagged Will's attention. They snickered and giggled an arm's length away from him, just obvious enough to be noticed. Will offered them a reserved smile and then turned his attention back to his father.

"Many years have passed since the death of my son—of your prince—but now he has returned to us!" the king cried. "A glorious feast will be held in his honor! Know that on this day, our kingdom has become whole once more!"

With that, the creatures and fairies burst once more into delighted screaming and cheering.

Will was not sure how, but he found himself standing next to a table that he couldn't see the end of. It was gold, just as everything else was, and draped in the same autumn cherry fabric dripping with glittering jewels.

Will had a plate full of delectable treats. Grapes fat enough to fit in his palm, and apples so sweet he thought they were covered in caramel. The guests of the Kingdom greeted him silently with bows and flourishes of their arms. They were in awe of him, but they wanted him to enjoy his first day back as the Prince of this realm.

Just when Will found the center of the table, with both ends now out of his sight, he thought he was about to explode with happiness. A tiered tray sat under a brilliant chandelier, illuminating rows and rows of cakes and other baked sweets. Will grabbed one, as white as snow but with a color as rich as blood when he bit into it. The pure sugar melted over his tongue and seared down his throat. Will could hardly resist the little moan that escaped him, and promptly ate five more of the treats. Each one was filled with a different color, the tastes so exotic and far beyond his reach, he could not place them if he tried.

“Are you enjoying yourself, my prince?” the stag asked, appearing behind Will like his shadow. His much, much taller shadow. He once again had the box strapped to his hip, and Will could see the colored fairies peeking out of it, begging for treats from the table.

Will extended his hand, palm up and displaying one of the cakes. The fairies leaped from their box to the dismay of the stag and began to gorge themselves with pointed teeth and clawed fingers. Despite his annoyance, the stag allowed this to happen. If his prince wished it, he would allow it.

“It’s better than I could have imagined,” Will said, finding it hard to bring his voice forward. He was nothing compared to the stag. A small man wearing a breakable crown. He felt as if he was half the height of his mother and father, and only a third of the height of this titanic monster.

The stag’s smile was broad. “I am glad that it is all to your liking.”

Will nodded, watching as the fat and sated fairies flew back to their box with tired dragonfly wings. He gazed up at the stag, amazed at how close he had come in just a few moments. The creature dipped its entire body down to match Will’s height. Will could only imagine the strength that the stag’s skinny thighs held, able to hold up his entire body without shaking.

The stag’s hands wandered to Will’s cheeks, his seemingly endless fingers reaching around to the back of Will’s head. Those same claws from before laced into his curly chocolate hair, but he had no fear in his heart that the stag would be anything but gentle with him.

The stag sealed the gap between them, resting their foreheads together. His dark eyes fell shut, while Will’s remained open. He was entranced by the swirling patterns of fur on the cheeks of the stag. He had never seen anything like them in his life. Will was certain that if he stared for too long, he would fall into the depths of those spirals and never find his way back out into the real world.

“My prince,” the stag whispered, his voice laden with emotion. “How long I have waited to touch you again; I do not know. How long I have waited to hear your voice, to see your beautiful eyes; I cannot remember.”

Heat and color bloomed on Will’s pale cheeks. He was not worthy of this praise.

He did not dare to interrupt the stag.

Long eyelashes weighed down by tears, the stag nuzzled his forehead against Will's. "We thought you had left for good." He paused to take in a shuddering breath. "I thought you had left me forever."

"That wasn't my intention," Will said.

The stag nodded. He drew away and extended himself to his full height once more. He was not embarrassed by the contact, unlike Will. There was no need to feel shame in loving his Prince, and feeling no need to hide it. "I know," the stag said.

He turned on his hoof and stalked away, going elsewhere to regain his composure.

Will, delighted to know that someone cared for him—that so many people cared for him—was even more delighted to turn back to the table of food just behind him.

What he saw made him drop his glass plate that he had been eating from. It shattered into ten million shards, spreading everywhere and coating the ground around Will's bare feet with danger.

On the table, his mother and father kneeled. The queen and king had their heads bowed, and their eyes shut. They clasped their hands in front of their chests, and Will felt his own heart lurch. What he thought could have been wings, like some of the other creatures, were sheets of skin soaked in blood. Their blood poured onto the table, coating the treats that had been there only a second earlier.

Will took a horrified step back, and pain like fire shot through his feet all the way to the roots of his hair. He looked down and lifted one foot so he could see the bottom of it. Shards of glass protruded, dribbling in rubies. Will set his foot back down, only to cry out with the pain that shot through him.

All around him, each of the creatures dropped dead. Some had their heads ripped off. Others had internal organs torn from their bodies while they were still alive. Their shrieks haunted Will and he clasped his hands over his ears to try to block out the noises.

The glorious table in front of Will, once bearing a banquet of delicacies, now held delicacies of other kinds. Pieces of fairies were laid in front of Will. Wings wrapped around fingers, ears stabbed onto skewers and roasted. A heart coated in frosting and still beating with thickened blood.

On the other side of the table, the stag stood with his back to Will.

Will tried to call for him, but all that came out was a pained scream. The little colored fairies, once his friends, now clawed at his arms and legs until his skin was hanging in shredded ribbons.

The stag turned, but it was not the monster that Will knew. This monster had tar black eyes, there was no mistaking that. It was not covered in downy fluff and feathers; instead, it had

ebony skin stretched thin over its bones. As the demon turned to face Will, each of its bones and joints cracked, creating a horrifying symphony of painful noises. Will tried to scream, but nothing came out of him.

Knob-need and pigeon-toed, the devil strode towards Will with a shaky confidence. It did not smile or frown, instead choosing a completely flat expression that scared Will more than anything else in the world. He wanted to take back the day, wanted to warn his parents not to hold the feast. How could they have known about the massacre they were going to be faced with?

The demon’s arms were long enough to reach through Will’s slaughtered parents, over the table and wrap hands around his throat. Its nails were like blades, digging into his skin and slicing his throat like ice. Will screamed one last breathy scream before his throat was ripped clean open.

Chapter End Notes

This one's gonna be a big'un ladies and gentlemen. Please strap on all seat belts and safety harnesses. Keep your arms and legs inside the vehicle at all times. Thank you and have a nice day!

The Labyrinth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will forced himself awake and out of the gruesome images. His breath was coming in quick, rough pants. The dream—no, the nightmare—had been so real that he reached up to put a trembling hand on his throat. He was intact, save for the damage to his psyche. He was not so certain about his feet since they were stinging like he had walked through the shards of the plate he dropped. Will looked down at the road and took in the damage he caused himself. His toenails were next to nothing, scraped and bleeding away freely. His skin was excruciating pain, the pads of his feet worn through nearly to muscle.

Only then did he think to question where he was.

The road?

Will turned himself around, looking down the stretch of asphalt that extended far behind him into the night. In front of him, it was the same. A single street lamp lit him, the only one he could see along the entire stretch of road. It did nothing more than make him feel less safe than he did.

He did not have anything on him, except for his boxer shorts and a t-shirt. Sweat soaked his clothing. Will realized with a jolt that he could not stop shivering; it was cold enough that he could see his breath clouding in front of his face.

Will looked to his side and saw Winston—loyal to a fault—sitting there waiting for him. The dog barked, and gave Will a pensive stare. He did not understand what was going on, and he was confused by Will's actions. Winston was an intelligent dog; he knew when something was up.

Will raked a hand through his sweaty hair and pushed the clinging strands out of his face. With a groan, he turned on his heel—as gently as he could— and began walking in the opposite direction he woke up facing. With any luck, this road would take him and Winston home. If he had *good* luck, he would be able to get at least an hour of sleep in before he had to be at the academy and solve other people's problems.

His feet were on fire, and each of his muscles screamed in protest, but Will continued walking. There was no way he could stop now. If the police found him a third time within two weeks, it would look suspicious.

Will did not know what he was going to tell Jack, let alone what he was going to tell Hannibal.

"Guess I'm not gonna tell them anything, am I?" he dryly asked Winston, who gave a woof in reply.

Will sighed and forced himself to accept that this was going to be a very long night.

The scenery around Will did not change as he walked. He wanted to run, but he was not sure if his muscles could handle the strain after so many hours of wear. One thing was certain; running would make him feel much better about the invisible danger lurking all around him. Out of the corners of his eyes, he could see the shadows moving; glittering eyes and giant antlers waiting to gore him like the body of Cassie Boyle.

He moved as quickly as his aching body would allow. If the nightmares caught up to him, there would be no telling if one was real or not. All Will could hope for was that some tourist, lost and drunk, would not come careening down the road to flatten him.

On second thought, that sounded better than trying to teach a classroom full of students who were either far too eager, or who had no energy left to give his boring lectures.

The more Will thought about it, the better being hit by a truck seemed. Maybe he could go back to that place in his dream where the colors were bright, and there was no pain.

Will glanced around at his surroundings. Dark sky, dark trees, dark grass. That night, not even the moon could offer any illumination. In the middle of the fields, far, far in the distance, he could see a few glimmering lights. He did not know what time it was exactly, but certainly, it was far too late for any sane person to be awake.

So what did that mean for Will?

He decided not to dwell on the question or the answer. Thoughts like that would only land him in more trouble. He was having a hard enough time as it was deciding if he was sane or not, seeing as how Hannibal—his not-therapist—didn't seem too intent on giving Will a straightforward answer.

Will assumed he and Winston were three hours into their walk when his little home in Wolf Trap popped into view. As they walked, the house grew larger and less welcoming. Will could see a few of the other dogs in the windows.

Will had forgotten to—rather, was not in the right mind to—leave any lights on. It made his quaint house foreboding.

The dark sky was just beginning to lighten at the horizon when Will finally got onto the porch. He opened the door—of *course*, he had left it unlocked—and let the dogs bound outside. Winston was the only one who followed him inside, just as exhausted as Will was. He collapsed onto his bed and let Winston jump up and join him.

Will closed his eyes for half a second before the first of ten alarms went off to wake him up. He did not have the effort to open his eyes again, but he knew that he had to get up. Will pushed himself up on his arms and slumped off the bed.

He went to the bathroom first, relieving himself and then hopping in the shower. The water, while never scalding out in Wolf Trap, was warm enough to relax his muscles. He stood

under the spray for a long time, watching as rivulets of blackened water trailed off his body and down the drain.

Will hung his head, soaking in the warmth as it ran over his neck and shoulders and down his chest. He felt a modicum of safety, knowing that he was home. He was not in a nightmare where invisible killers were murdering his friends and family.

Will shampooed his hair, brushed his teeth, and contemplated shaving. He scratched his scruffy cheek and then decided against it. He could go one more day without shaving.

That was what he said to himself four days ago, and now he looked like a ragamuffin.

Will found his day to be extremely tiresome, more so than usual. He could not stand on his feet for extended periods, so he sat in the chair behind his desk for most of it. For some reason, that made some of his students believe that he could not see or hear them. They were all adults, but it was like wrangling a group of kindergartners. His class tended to be low on the Oh-I'd-like-to-take-that-class-and-be-lectured-at-by-that-guy list, but today the people he was surrounded by made their disinterest clearer than usual.

While he sat, Will could periodically hear the giggling of the fairies or the clopping of the hooves of the stag. He knew that it was not real—at least he was ninety percent certain it wasn't real—but he found himself glancing over his shoulders. Just in case.

At some point during the day, he assumed towards the end; he found himself faced by Alana. She wore a concerned expression and kept her arms crossed over her chest. Will had no idea what she was saying. There was a wall between his ears and her voice, making every noise sound like fluff. She moved her hands to her hips, and then her mouth stopped moving.

He looked up at her through his glasses, but she was out of focus. If he concentrated, Alana almost looked like the Queen from his dreams. That was certainly a weird role for his subconscious to put her into.

"Will?" she asked, concern painted all over her features.

Her voice was much too loud, and Will found himself shying away from the noise. Clear as a bell; one word was able to pierce right through both of his ears and leave them ringing.

Will raised a hand to press at one of his ears, hoping that he had not developed an ear infection of some sort. "I'm sorry—what?" he asked. Will furrowed his eyebrows, not sure where this conversation was going, but knowing that it only had a few routes that it could take.

"This is exactly what I'm talking about, Will," Alana said, exasperated. She looked like a mother worrying over her child. Her distress was smacking Will in the face repeatedly, making him feel like he was drowning.

“What—what are we talking about?” Will pressed, gently trying to pry an answer out of Alana.

“*You*, Will. I was talking about you,” she said. She was not bothering to hide her annoyance or her concern. “I’m scared.”

“You don’t need to be scared of me,” Will said. He gave his best shot at a smile, but it was hollow.

Alana saw right through it. “I’m not scared *of* you, Will. I’m scared *for* you. When I asked you what you talked about today with your students, you didn’t have an answer.”

“I didn’t know that you were speaking,” Will said.

"You weren't listening to me?" Alana asked. Her voice changed in an instant, from doting mother to a psychiatrist.

“No, not in the way you’re thinking,” Will said. He stood up from his chair, feeling his knees wobble with the effort of holding him up. “I was somewhere else,” he finished.

“Where were you?” Alana asked, her plucked eyebrows dipping together.

Will shrugged; at the moment it was the best answer he could give.

"I'll talk to Jack. And I'll talk with Hannibal," Alana decided. Her full lips were pressed into a thin line, back to motherly mode.

“I don’t need a break,” Will assured. His feet deciding to engulf him in waves of pain would tell him otherwise. “We’ve been through this,” he said. “I… like what I do,” Will said. He picked his words as wisely as he could.

“I know we’ve been through it, but that doesn’t make this time any different than the times before this,” Alana practically growled. “Will, sooner or later this is going to kill you. It’s *already* killing you. How much sleep did you get last night?” she asked.

“A few hours,” Will replied. Will walked around his table with his wobbling legs. “I’m *fine*,” he said. Will did his best not to hiss out the words, but he was not sure that all of his efforts were worth it. "When I need a babysitter, I'll let you know."

Will meant for his words to be sarcastic, but as he walked past Alana, he could see the shock on her face. Alana turned to keep their conversation going, but Will ducked his head. He was doing everything he could to stop their conversation from developing into an argument.

Will ground his teeth from side to side to keep himself from grimacing as he walked through the hallways and toward the parking lot. Jack had not summoned him, and there was not a case open, so he was free for now. He was a real piece of shit today, and he knew it.

If he had slept just a few minutes more, he would have been fine. Will Graham was an expert at functioning on half an hour of sleep. It was his brain’s fault. He wasn't the one who got up in the middle of the night to go for a leisurely stroll.

Will unlocked his car, got in, and shut the door after himself a little harder than was necessary. He stayed like that for a minute, not bothering to turn over his engine yet. He leaned forward and rested his forehead against the bleak, worn-out gray of his steering wheel.

When Will looked up, he was not in his car. The change in scenery was shocking, but not something that he was not used to. Across from him sat Hannibal, legs crossed casually and hands clasped in his lap. He stared at Will with his usual intensity, forcing Will to look away. Will licked his lips and ruffled his hands through his hair.

“Will?” Hannibal asked, his tone leaving room for an answer.

“I’m sorry,” Will muttered, jaw tight. “What were we talking about?” That question lingered on his tongue from earlier, making him realize he had yet to apologize to Alana for being rude to her.

“We weren’t,” Hannibal said. He breathed in deep through his nose, letting it out softly. “You’ve been sitting there the entire time,” he explained, with a little wave of his hand to emphasize his point. Hannibal tilted his head a degree to the left, lips pursed. “You haven’t said a word.”

"I don't feel like talking," Will said. His throat felt too dry as if he had been running around after a maniac.

“We don’t have to talk,” Hannibal replied. He straightened his vest, and then leaned back in his plush chair across from Will’s. It was not disconcerting anymore to see Will suddenly 'wake up'. He quirked an eyebrow and looked over Will. “This is your time, and we can spend it in silence. But I do believe that talking is the point of these sessions, and I would like you to tell me why you look tired today.”

Will shot Hannibal—Hannibal’s cheek to be more accurate—a murderous look. “I always look tired,” he quipped.

“More than usual,” Hannibal offered, the tilt to his head increasing a bit. “Did you sleepwalk?” he asked.

“Yes,” Will said. He dropped his head into his hands. Will hoped that the same sort of magic in his dream would transport him to later in the evening. He had no such magic on his side.

“How far did you go?” Hannibal asked.

“What does it matter?” Will asked, furrowing his eyebrows at the floor. All he wanted to do was go home and get a good night’s sleep. He knew he would not, but it was a comforting thought. “A-about a mile,” he decided. He had no real idea of time or distance from that morning. “I didn’t get home until it was six a.m.,” he said, hoping that would give Hannibal an idea of how far he had gone.

“You were not aware? Or did you wake up during your excursion?”

“I woke up in the street,” Will said. “Like the last few times. I go farther each time, like—like I’m trying to get away from something.”

“What are you trying to get away from?” Hannibal asked, his interest piqued.

“I don’t know,” Will said. He clenched his teeth and stared hard at the floor. “Aren’t you supposed to tell me what I’m running from?”

“You know yourself better than anybody, Will,” Hannibal said. “I am here to help you realize these things, not to tell you what you think. I would wager it is stress. Sleepwalking is more common in adults who have suffered a lack of sleep than those who experience a full night of rest. As you are an insomniac, I think we have our answer.”

“I’m running away from my stress,” Will repeated, letting the idea brew.

“Did you have nightmares?” Hannibal asked.

"It started as a pleasant dream," Will corrected as if it made a difference. "It became a nightmare at the end. That's why I woke up."

“Who was it about?”

"No one that I know," Will said. He shook his head, thinking about the similarities. The voice of the stag that had sounded so familiar, the face of the Queen that was so like Alana's face. "Not in the way my dreams normally are. There was a woman who looked like Alana, and a creature that sounded like you.”

“Our subconscious often puts those that we think about most into our dreams. It is trying to tell us something that our waking mind cannot see on its own. Tell me, Will, why would you dream about Dr. Bloom?”

“I don’t know,” Will said. In truth, he could still feel the burn of her lips against his. Maybe his subconscious mind wanted to show Will just how highly he thought of her, but the pieces didn’t line up. “Why would I dream about you?” he asked.

Hannibal let his eyes wander over Will, none of it escaping Will’s attentive gaze. “Because your subconscious is seeking as many answers as your waking mind is seeking.”

“But you don’t give me answers,” Will retorted. “You only help me see the answers in myself,” he grumbled, giving a sarcastic flourish of his hands.

Hannibal’s stoic expression did not falter for a second. “Perhaps your brain is trying to tell you that if you were to accept more help, you would be able to find those answers on your own.”

“And you and Alana are the solutions?” Will muttered. He looked away, towards Hannibal’s tie, but knew that Hannibal was still scrutinizing him.

“I can’t say,” Hannibal said.

Will darted his eyes up to Hannibal's chin and tried to ignore the image of some nightmarish creature hovering behind him.

“William?” Hannibal pressed, cautious not to prod too much.

“I want to leave,” Will decided.

“It has been forty-five minutes,” Hannibal argued, though he kept his tone neutral. “Leaving now would be incredibly rude. We could discuss something else if that would make you more comfortable."

Will shook his head as he stood and gathered his coat. “I’m a rude person,” Will said with an air of finality.

He did not dare to look at Hannibal, or the creature behind him, as he shoved out of the door and through the hallways of the cramped office. He burst out of the outer door and into fresh air, gulping it in. The cold air felt amazing in his throat, soothing where he felt cut up and scarred. Will made a beeline for his car, and only when he was securely locked inside of it did he look back up at Hannibal’s office.

The curtains were open, and the lights were still on, letting a faint yellow glow into the parking lot. In one of the tall windows, Will could see Hannibal’s steady outline. Will felt a flash of guilt pass through him, and he nearly got out of his car. Instead, determined to be a stubborn asshole all day, he kicked his car into gear and drove out of the parking lot.

Will drove home in silence, his eyelids drooping occasionally. There was only one near-accident. A giant elk of sorts that seemed lost tried to cross the road and Will nearly careened right into it. At the last second, the gigantic deer—or elk, Will had not decided what it was—ran away and into the forest. But that was it. There was no excitement, and none of his nightmares were fast enough to keep up with his vehicle. Will let himself go into a trance and drove home by muscle memory.

Only when he felt his tires churning along his loose gravel driveway did Will come back to reality. The sun was just below the horizon, but his house still managed to look warm and welcoming.

A few dogs lounged on the porch, while the rest had stayed inside all day. Will greeted all of them individually as he entered his house, and headed for the kitchen. Already the pack was nipping at his heels, hungry and expectant.

Will set out bowls of food and water for each of them, catering to their special needs. Regular dog food for most of them, canned dog food for Will’s oldest dog who no longer had strong teeth, and a few vitamins for some of the sicklier dogs. Then there was a matter of feeding himself. He had three-week-old pizza that he should have thrown out three weeks ago, and a meager helping of fish he had caught from the river a few days earlier.

He decided on the fish and put it into the microwave.

After scarfing down his scraps and carefully downing three fingers of whiskey, Will settled for bed. The dogs were taken care of and already sleeping, but Will could not find the strength to close his eyes and keep them shut. Only an hour ago, he had been ready to pass out in his car, but now that he was in his bed, there was a looming sense of danger. None of the dogs cared, and he knew that he was overreacting, but his mind would not stop telling him that something was wrong.

Will tried all of the tricks in the book, but nothing would get him to sleep. He watched the minutes tick by on his digital clock with a painful slowness. They seemed to drag on for hours each. He did his best not to think about anything, especially not murderers, but keeping his brain from wandering was becoming increasingly difficult.

He focused instead on his breathing, and on the breathing of his dogs. They all had different ways that they breathed. Winston had a little whistle when he breathed out, Chance snored like a thunderstorm, and Lola whimpered in her sleep. Will wondered if the little dog had nightmares, too

After hours of doing nothing, Will was certain that he could claw his own eyes out. His eyelids were heavy, and each time he blinked it was as though sand was scraping over his eyeballs. Will decided to close his eyes and try to get his body to relax and his mind to follow suit.

Just as he was on the brink of falling into a deep sleep, a chittering giggle in his ear woke him up.

Will's eyes snapped open, staring at the alarm clock and memorizing the numbers. He could still hear the giggling, but he did not dare to peer over his shoulder. The last thing he needed was to see a little girl standing in his house who did not belong there.

3:17 a.m.

He had gotten in a few hours of sleep, and there were no nightmares that he could remember. Now, though, he was dealing with this damn giggling. It took a long time to muster up the courage to flip himself over, ready to fight for his life if need be.

Will was expecting a girl soaked in blood or some other monster to be standing in his bedroom. Instead, there was a little dragonfly of sorts, holding up a piece of Will's sheets to its chin.

Winston was awake and staring at the creature intently. He snuffled at it, but whenever he got too close, the bug brought the sheet up over its head. Winston would whine or growl, and the creature would giggle gleefully.

Will sat up, as Winston raised his foot to paw at the bug. Will shoed the dog away, although he did not go very far. Winston did not look away from the lump in the sheets, fascinated more than if he found an old bone in the yard.

As gently as he could, Will pulled the sheets away from the creature. It was by no means a bug. Nor was it very cute, but Will couldn't tear his eyes away from it. This little thing sitting

on his bed, hiding from his dog, was from his dream the night before. If Winston were not so interested, Will would have brushed it off as another hallucination and gone back to sleep.

The being grinned at Will and bared serrated, dagger-like teeth. On wings that looked like cellophane, the beast took to the sky. It flitted its wings, catching whatever light remained in the sky and throwing it all over the room. Will could see how at first he thought that it was a dragonfly.

The creature flew closer, getting into Will's space and looking him over with abnormally large eyes. It appeared as though both eyes were entirely black, with only the smallest amount of light reflecting off the inky surfaces.

"Are you a fairy?" Will ventured, though he had no idea why he was asking. He did not know if this thing could speak, or if it could understand him.

The creature nodded in excitement. Its skinny green body flew away from Will, but then it doubled back. If Will was not mistaken, he could see the confusion and disappointment on the fairy's dainty features. It flew back to Will and grabbed onto the sleeve of his t-shirt. The fairy tugged on the fabric.

"You want me to follow you?" Will asked. It seemed like the natural thing to say; surely, the fairy wanted *something* from him. He just needed to figure out what.

The fairy giggled in that same way and looped away from Will. Will moved so that his feet were on the ground, though he was still sitting on the edge of his bed.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

At Will's question, the fairy curled its fingers, beckoning Will to come closer. Winston seemed to think it was safe enough, trotting after the fairy whenever it flew closer and closer to the door. Will was not sure what to think.

He had a sinking feeling in his gut that this was going to end badly, but he got up and followed the fairy. As if the door was not there, it slipped right through the wood and into the outside world. Will took one last glance back at his dogs, most of whom were still sound asleep. They had no idea about the fairy. He opened the door for Winston, who went running after the little creature.

Without knowing if he would return or not, Will followed after Winston and the fairy.

Chapter End Notes

Originally this chapter was close to 10k words. I thought I'd spare you of that.

The Fairy and the Faun

The fairy stayed near Will, never going far enough out of his sight that he would lose track of it. With the way that its body seemed to glow from within, Will was not sure if it was possible for him to lose the little being.

Will followed the fairy for what felt like hours, glad that his feet were numb with the cold. They were walking through the thin, sickly forest that surrounded his house and he had not thought to bring shoes. If anything, he was hoping that the fairy would lead him on a pleasant stroll around his house and then back to his bed. Of course, that was not the case, and the fairy forced them on a grueling hike.

Winston, glancing back at Will occasionally, was having the time of his life. A walk with Will, and the fairy dancing above his head. When the fairy's wings grew sore, it sat on top of Winston's head for a few moments. The fairy allowed Will the chance to catch up, but never for very long. Before he knew it, the fairy was back in the air, and Will was trailing along like the weak link in their small, strange pack.

As they walked, the forest grew denser around Will until he could barely squeeze through some of the trees. He was not sure how long they had been walking, but it was enough that his legs were starting to ache and he was dying for a drink of water.

At some point in the trek, the fairy stopped flying forward. Instead, it hovered above a patch of ground, waiting for Will and Winston. When the two of them caught up, the fairy floated to the ground and lowered its face. Winston did the same, and Will was ready to pass out from the overwhelming gratitude.

He sank to his knees next to Winston and the fairy, both slurping away at the puddle of water. Will did not think to question the safety of the water before scooping up some of it in his hands and drinking greedily. It was cold enough that it burned his throat, but he was grateful to have his thirst slaked.

They were done drinking when the fairy decided to get up and continue flying.

Will followed, no longer questioning where they were going. For all he knew, Will was not in the same state anymore.

The longer they walked, the more Will began to notice his surroundings. Instead of standing up straight, the trees began to bow and curve in mysterious ways. They were making parts in the thick trees, creating a rather straight path that was free of any roots for Will to trip over. As they walked, the trees gave way to stones stacked high upon each other to form walls that were ten feet tall. The curving branches of the trees turned to vines, crawling and covering most of the stones.

Will reached out and brushed his hand along the sides of the walls, taking in all that was around him. The fairy led them through the winding halls; the only word Will had to describe where they were was a labyrinth of sorts. If he were there on his own, he wouldn't be able to

navigate it. The fairy moved instinctually, taking Will and Winston through easily-overlooked cracks in the vines and stone structures. Overhead, the sliver of the moon shone over everything as though it were full. Will could see the bright green of the vines, and the worn blue-gray of the stones that made the walls of the labyrinth.

The fairy squealed, and Will gave it his attention again. It hovered in front of a stretch of wall covered in vines so thick that it would be impossible to cut through all of them with a machete.

Winston paced in circles beneath the fairy, whining at it. He wanted to keep going on their adventure.

Will approached the fairy and Winston, and the vines suddenly came to life. Like a magnet pulling at them, the overgrown plant life parted for the trio. The fairy zipped away and dove down a hole in the ground. With more caution, this time, Will trailed after the fairy.

This part of the maze was free of all vegetation, aside from a few vines trying to poke over the top of the massive walls. Will gazed around in wonder, taking it all in. Each stone was carved with accurate precision, creating a story that Will could not piece together.

There were carvings of the fairies, of the stag that Will had seen in his dreams, and of the Queen and King. The carving that drew his interest, in particular, was one on a huge slab of stone. It was not on the walls; instead, it sat in front of the hole the fairy had gone into. Will stepped up to the stone and looked it over with furrowed eyebrows.

The Queen and King had their faces in their hands, and behind them stood the black stag. His eyes were mournful, and he was frowning. In the center of the carving was a young man lying on his back. Will tilted his head to the side, looking over the etchings with extreme care. He reached out and brushed his fingers over the sunken stone images. He was not a vain person, but he could not see the man in the carving as anyone but himself. He knew his hair better than anyone else did, curly and always a mess. His eyes were closed, but Will knew that they were his own.

Winston, who barked at him, drew him out of his thoughts.

Will peered around the stone and found Winston standing at the edge of the hole leading into the ground. It was eight feet across and deep enough that Will couldn't see the bottom of it.

"It must be a well," he mused, noticing how the same carved stone paved the hole. Leading down was a set of spiraling stairs, and Will found himself descending without a second thought.

On paws a little less sure than his own, Winston followed Will like the faithful companion that he was.

Will alternated between staring at the steps that spun far below him, and up at the moon that hung high above him. His normal feelings of sinking fear and crippling anxiety had left him, and Will felt free as he followed the stairs downwards.

Without the weathering that the carvings above suffered, the carvings along the walls of the well were better preserved. Will could see each line, but had no idea what any of them meant. As far as Will was concerned, it was all gibberish.

Before he knew it, Will was at the base of the stairs. A wide cavern opened up before him, and he could see better than he had before, which was a mystery to Will. The green fairy was waiting for him, followed by blue, pink, and yellow fairies. They flitted around Will, giggling and tugging at his hair. The fairies finished investigating Will, and then they flew to Winston and began poking and prodding at the dog. He was unsure about the attention from the fairies, but Will calmed him with his lack of concern. They meant no harm.

Hopefully.

Will explored the cavern as far as he could see, not brave enough to venture into the darkness that lingered just outside of his line of vision. As he walked around, he considered a few things. In the ceiling of the cavern, a wide hole let in the light of the moon. It was not the staircase Will had followed, but he hadn't seen the hole when he was on the surface. Will assumed it was in some other part of the labyrinth. The moonlight was unfiltered by the depth and allowed Will to see everything with stark clarity. Standing directly under the hole, was a gigantic statue. It was bent in half and curled in on itself like a child, but still graceful. Huge antlers protruded from the statue, nearly brushing the ceiling of the cavern.

Will circled the statue and then turned back to Winston and the fairies. Winston was on his side with his arms and legs open for belly rubs. The four fairies were doing just that, sitting on the dog's ribcage and petting him with gentle motions. They scratched with their little claws, and Winston's tail thumped happily against the ground. Will smiled at the sight. It was the first real smile he had had all day long.

A sickening series of cracks behind Will made him spin on his heel. His eyes were wide, and his heart was ready to beat out of his chest, but there was nothing moving around him. It had to have been a hallucination.

Although, Will was certain that the statue with antlers had not been as tall when he last checked. The statue spread its arms, and the legs were less hunched. Will took a moment to take in the new details. The feet of the statue were huge hooves, and on its hands were monstrously long claws that looked sharp enough to rip Will's throat clean out of him.

As soon as Will decided it was safe enough for him to turn away, the same series of crackles followed. He whipped around and caught the statue in motion.

The statue stood on monstrously long legs and extended to its full height. If only for a moment, the statue stood straight, and Will was able to take it in. After that, as though his bones were weary and fractured, the statue stooped.

When its eyes sparked to life, Will knew exactly what he was looking at.

The stag bent down in a bow that had the tip of his nose touching the ground.

"My prince," the stag crooned. He stood up on his knobby legs and took a few cautionary steps towards Will.

Winston jumped to his feet and dislodged the fairies. They became upset by the disruption, but Winston was preoccupied. The dog stared at the stag, his hackles raised. He would not attack, but he was not quite sure of this new thing. The stag did not look like the fairies, but he had yet to make any threatening moves.

The stag only smiled. Will saw right away that the stag forced his smile. It reminded him of when he was in no particular mood to interact with anyone. “You brought a companion,” the stag said with a tilt of his head. “How charming.”

“His name is Winston,” Will replied.

Will furrowed his eyebrows. Was he talking to this thing? He could not tell if he was hallucinating or not. Usually, the monsters didn't talk back. More often than not, they screamed and tried to rip Will to pieces.

“And you?” the stag asked, and turned his attention to Will. His long ears flickered with excitement, but his expression was neutral.

“My name is Will,” he said. “Who are you?” he asked.

After heaving a great sigh, the stag began to move around the chamber. The stag looked around his surroundings and ran his hand along one of the walls as he walked. "I am but a faun," he said. The stag gave Will a modest dip of his head. His movements were anything but modest. He was graceful and careful as he stepped, just as a real stag would be. "A servant of the earth, if you will. I have had many names, but most call me Elnias.

“I have waited here for so long, much longer than any of the others,” he continued. As he talked, he moved along an invisible path through the chamber. “Centuries, maybe longer. This is a place that I have come to know as my home.” Elnias turned to face Will; his head tilted ninety degrees to the side. Will found himself tilting his head to match the angle as best as he could. “It is not my real home, far from it. However, it has become the only place that I know. I dread to think that I no longer know what my real home looks like anymore. Would you like to know why—why I have been waiting here for so long?”

Will nodded.

A smile spread across Elnias’s features. He righted himself and then walked in a looping path back to Will. "I was ordered to stay here, by my King and by my Queen. You see, they lost their son. He was a beautiful creature. When he was first born, I was scared to stand anywhere near him. He was so fragile, unlike anyone else in the kingdom. He was like the smallest of sparrows. Just a tiny thing. He was to be King when his father handed him the crown, but fate had other plans for him. A tragic accident, really,” he said. His tone was mournful as he spoke. “Just a young boy at the time, he didn’t know the dangers outside of his kingdom.

“He was a curious prince. No one could fault him for that, but he did not know what was good for himself. One night, under cover of total darkness, he escaped,” Elnias said. He moved his hands extravagantly as he spoke, accentuating his tale. “It was my duty to watch him, along with my friends,” he explained. The fairies, as if knowing that their master was summoning them, flew back to Elnias. He opened the lid of a container strapped to his hip, and they happily flew inside of it. “But you see, dear Will, he was a bright boy. So smart, in fact, then when he did not want to be found, he could not be found.

“I searched for him everywhere that I could think of. Only at last did I think to look here, in this world.”

The stag doubled over and brought his hands to his face. Will was horrified, he didn't know what to do for the grieving creature.

“I found his body,” Elnias said. He turned to the stairs and began to scale them, back towards the surface. Will was compelled to follow. "He was broken and mangled. The human world is not kind to anyone that lives in it.” Elnias led Will across the open courtyard when they reached the surface. His graceful movements brought them to a crumbling wall. Compared to the rest of the labyrinth that was in decent shape, this section of the wall was in chaos. “I found him here, crying and alone. Time passes much differently in the human world, and he did not know what he was feeling.”

Elnias stooped down low to the ground and brushed his fingers over the dirt there. Will had no doubt he could still see the body of his dead prince. “He could feel the cold biting into his toes and his fingers at night. During the day, he did not know to hide from the sun that seared his flesh. He was not aware that he needed to eat food, or that he needed to drink water.” Elnias made a mournful noise deep in his throat. The resonant sound shook Will to his core and made him feel as though his very bones were freezing. “He was on the brink of death when I found him. A week had gone by, maybe two. We thought that we lost him for an hour.”

Elnias stood, cradling in his arms a young boy that was no longer there. “I carried his body back to his parents, but it was too late.” Elnias turned his head up to face the moon and held up the invisible body of the prince. "He died on the journey back to our world. There was nothing to do. He was as good as dead when I found him; my poor prince did not know my name. He recognized my face alone, and it pains me to say that my face is the last that he saw.”

As if reverting to a statue, Elnias curled in on himself. He brought in all of his limbs and made himself as tiny as possible.

“A monster such as myself was the last thing that delicate, beautiful boy would ever see. Not the faces of his parents, or the beauty of his world. Only my face, mangled with dismay and soaked in tears.” Elnias’s words trailed off, and he bundled himself tighter together.

“I’m sorry,” Will said. He did not know what else he could say.

Elnias took a moment to gather himself before he swiveled, extending to his full height as he did so, and faced Will. “There is no need to apologize,” he tutted. Elnias moved forward with

ease, approaching Will. “For his father, the King, knew that while his son’s body was not eternal, his soul was. He knew that it would find its way back here, to where he died. He would be searching for himself, for what he lost. The King had us open many, many portals around the world in hopes that his son would return to him. Now, I am the last guardian of these portals, and this is the last portal that remains.”

Will did not like where this was going.

“And here you are,” Elnias purred. His ears flickered in a happy, baby-deer way. “You’ve returned, I must tell your father and mother! Everyone will be pleased to know that you are here with us again.”

Elnias reached out a trembling arm to brush his nails against Will’s cheek, but Will flinched away from the motion. He could sense the waves of hurt rolling from Elnias’s body.

“Hold on just a minute,” Will interrupted. He looked over Elnias with a skeptical furrow to his brows. “What if I’m not the prince? You’re describing a young boy; I’m halfway through my life. I’m afraid you’ve got the wrong person.”

“I know that he is you,” Elnias insisted. “His eyes were as blue as the sky, and he always looked a tad messy. No matter how hard someone would try to contain him, there was no controlling the pure, devilish child that he was.” Elnias smiled softly. “You look just like him. My dear Prince Ruvyn.”

“There are a lot of people that look just like each other,” Will argued.

“Ah, this is true,” Elnias agreed. Will could tell that he had not persuaded Elnias in the slightest. “And for this reason, I have brought this.”

Elnias reached behind his body with those long arms, and Will was confident that Elnias would procure a sword and stab him to death. He could feel in his gut that this world Elnias spoke about was the afterlife. With slower movements, Elnias produced a book from behind his back. The faun held it at arm’s length, presenting his offering to Will.

Will took the book and immediately flipped to the first page. There was nothing on it. He flipped through all of the pages and found a whole lot of nothing on each page.

“What is this?” Will demanded. He would have shaken the book to prove his point, but he couldn’t bring himself to put the book in harm’s way.

“It will help you,” Elnias said. With his fluid motions, he began to circle Will. Feeling like an owl, Will moved his head to keep track of Elnias. “In sixteen days,” he began, drawing out each word, “the moon will be brimming. On this night, and this night alone, can you return to your kingdom as the rightful heir. But!” Elnias turned abruptly and held up a bony finger in Will's face. "First you must complete three tasks." Two of his other fingers joined the first, emphasizing his words. “That book will help you,” he said. “All it needs… is a single drop of blood and it will bloom into life. After giving the book your offering, you must open it while you are alone, and it will tell you what it is that you must do.”

Just one drop, Will thought sarcastically. He knew how these things went. One drop of blood never really meant one drop of blood, especially when it involved fairytales or nightmares.

“This will help you, as well,” Elnias said. From his container for the fairies, he pulled a piece of chalk and handed it to Will.

Still holding his book, Will took the chalk with his thumb and forefinger, as if it would jump to life and bite his hand off.

“Should you need them,” Elnias said, patting his container and making the fairies inside squeal, “you need only ask for their assistance.”

Holding his chalk and his book, Will watched as Elnias retreated and descended the steps into the cavernous pit below. Will watched until Elnias was completely gone, and he could no longer hear the clopping of his hooves on the stone steps into the hole of the well. Will looked at Winston, who was relaxed now that Elnias was gone. Will glanced at the gorgeous cover of the book, back to Winston, and then sighed.

Will looked up at the moon, silently pleading for an escape.

The Faun's Gifts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will awoke to a horrible searing in his brain. It was worse than any headache he had ever experienced. The pain throbbed through his entire brain, making it impossible to open his eyes. Distantly, he could hear the chirping of birds and the shuffling of his dogs as they began to wake up and move about.

One of them—sounded like Buster—hopped up on his bed and began to pace circles. Will needed to teach them that the bed was off limits because once one of them jumped up, they all decided to join in on the game. Soon enough, Will's bed was swamped in dogs all snuffling and hoping to get good morning pats.

Will did just that, unable to resist giving them attention, but his brain was still on fire. The migraine of sorts—he had no idea what else to call it—was bad enough to put an invisible pressure on his eyeballs. Screwing them shut made it worse, and leaving them alone was just as painful.

His limbs were sore and as heavy as lead, and Will found himself struggling to roll off his mattress. He recoiled at the feeling of the cold floor on his feet, and he was brought immediately back to the dream he had the night before. The sleepwalking for hours into the forest, the gigantic stag that had been plaguing him for what seemed like years. Only now, it spoke, and it had a name.

Will forced his eyelids open and looked down at the floor. The underbrush battered his legs until they were bruised and scraped up. His toenails, the ones that were bleeding the night before, were missing now. The rush of air to his exposed skin was dangerous, and he knew that he needed to wrap his feet up soon. With one last push of morbid curiosity, Will raised one foot and turned his ankle so that he could see the underside.

All of the blood rushed out of Will's face as he stared at the damage he caused himself.

Oozing blisters covered the pads of his feet, some open and an angry shade of red. Where cuts and abrasions didn't cover Will, he was stabbed hundreds of times over by pine needles and leftover debris from the leaf litter.

Will stared at his foot and felt his throat close up. He refused to cry about something as simple as his feet being roughed up. Despite the quivering of his muscles, Will stood and hobbled to the front door. He couldn't keep the pressure on either foot for long, but managed to get the door open and let the dogs out. Winston, once again, was the only one to stay. He was sound asleep in his bed, because he was just about as tired as Will was. Winston was lucky; he didn't have anywhere to be in a few hours.

Aching all over, Will stumbled to his bathroom and into the shower. The hot water was like daggers in his already-raw feet, but he suffered through it.

Will watched as the water running down his body turned to black, and then to red as it went down the drain.

He peeked in the mirror after toweling himself dry.

He wasn't going to shave today, either.

Will trudged through work and spent his time counting down each second as they passed. Five hours was three hundred minutes. Three hundred minutes was eighteen thousand seconds. He could handle eighteen thousand one-seconds.

His feet hurt him so much that he didn't stand once throughout the entire day. Rather than causing himself an unnecessary amount of pain, Will sat with his legs spread under his desk. Sitting like that, he could prop his feet up on his heels. His heels were better off than the rest of his feet and were able to bear the brunt of the burden.

Throughout the day, Will's mind wandered. He continued to speak to his classes, and he could only hope that the words sounded sane. The last thing he needed was to have his students questioning if he was drunk or having a stroke on the job. Will couldn't help it, what with the dream he had. It had been so realistic; he could almost hear the fairy's giggling and see its friends petting Winston's belly, as though his dream was real. Will could remember every grumble in Elnias's voice as the ancient creature spoke of the prince that had died in the labyrinth, so close to where he belonged.

The message of Will's dream struck a nervous chord within his body.

With a dream like that, Will found himself questioning his mind. It didn't mean anything, although he knew that Hannibal would argue. Will was grateful that it wasn't a nightmare, but it wasn't a very weighty consolation. The more he thought about it, Will couldn't remember the last time that he was mildly aware when he was sleepwalking. He wasn't sure if there had ever been a time when he was aware of his sleepwalking.

At the end of his teaching day, before Alana could corner him, Will got up. Now that she was no longer worried about scaring him off, Will found himself with her in his classroom or at his house more often than not. It wasn't a bad thing, but he wasn't used to it. He saw her for a glance down one of the hallways, a glance that was cut off by Jack stepping around the corner and walking towards Will like a predator going in for the kill.

As imposing as ever, Jack Crawford stood over Will like he still had something to prove. Will couldn't bring himself to look at Jack. He knew that the pain he felt was written all over his face and he didn't want someone—especially if that someone was Jack—to see how weak he was.

"I'd like to ask for your help, Will," Jack said. His voice was how it usually sounded, the calm before the storm. Will knew what a Jack-storm was like; he certainly didn't have the energy to deal with one.

“Are you going to ask for my help or demand it?” Will snarked. He internally slapped himself. There he was, inviting wrath from one of the most threatening men at the Bureau. Will kept his eyes averted, fixed somewhere passed Jack’s left shoulder.

Will watched out of his peripherals as each muscle in Jack’s face tightened.

“I’m going to ask, but that doesn’t mean that you have a choice in what your answer is,” Jack replied. His tone was erring on the rude side of curt. He was out of patience for the day. Will could not blame him.

“Who is it this time?” Will asked as they walked through the hallways and towards the forensics division of the building. Keeping up with Jack on a good day was improbable, on a bad day like today, it was impossible. Will did all he could to keep from wincing in front of his boss. He thought instead of Elnias’s grace, of how the faun showed no pain or weariness in his weathered bones. What would Will not give to borrow some of Elnias’s elegance?

“We think it’s the Chesapeake Ripper,” Jack answered.

Will wanted to roll his eyes and say *oh God, not that guy again. Haven’t we dealt with enough from him already?* but he didn’t. Will gave a hum of acknowledgment and hung his head.

There were three bodies, as was average for the Ripper. They were laid out on their metal slabs, being dissected and pored over.

“No similarities between any of the victims, and no connections between any of them, either,” Beverly said. She crossed her arms and looked at Will. Her lips were pursed, waiting for an answer from Will.

Jack, Will noted, wore the same expression as Beverly.

Will swallowed around the sudden lumpy, dry patch in his throat. He pulled his blue, latex gloves on tighter and approached the bodies.

“It’s a textbook Ripper killing,” Price added. He was poking at one of the bodies, checking under precise flaps of skin to see if there was anything else to be noted.

Will nodded and stepped up to one of the bodies. She was uncovered, staring blankly at the ceiling. Price was still rattling on about something or other about the killings, noting this or that, but Will couldn’t hear him. Will closed his eyes and sank into the familiar, warm embrace of the Chesapeake Ripper’s mind.

The hand of time could not clear up the images, everything blurred in front of Will as if looking through a dirty camera lens. In the corner of his eye, he could see bright flashes of colors darting about on light wings. Further in the corner, a creature of monstrous size loomed and plodded about with even steps.

Will missed the images right in front of him, of ripping the woman’s stomach out of her body, followed by her intestines. He took a little more than he usually would from his victims, but

he wasn't about to fall prey to greed or gluttony.

To his left, another massive black creature prowled. This one had a dangerous intent that entombed it; Will was positive that it was trying to hunt him down. The monster's head whipped up, and tar-black eyes stared right through Will. Before it had a chance to charge him, Will shook himself of the vision.

He came back to reality more confused than usual, but nothing about that was out of the ordinary. Will glanced around at his colleagues, all looking at him with furrowed brows and tiny frowns.

"That one was a long one," Jack commented slyly.

He was not sly at all; Will could hear the suspicion lacing his words.

"It's like Price said," Will muttered. "Textbook Chesapeake Ripper."

"Nothing about the Chesapeake Ripper is textbook," Jack argued.

Will turned his head one degree to glower at Jack from behind his curly fringe that nearly covered his eyes from the right angle. One more layer of defense to pair with his glasses. "I would argue that he has his own textbook and that these people are pulled straight from it. I don't understand, Jack, if you know that it's the Ripper, why did you bring me here?" Will could taste the agitation rising in his throat. There was only one place to direct it as far as he was concerned.

"Because I was hoping that you could do your *job*," Jack snarled. "That thing that you do—where you find the killers. Find this one, Will," Jack snapped.

"My job is teaching," Will tersely reminded Jack. "And I've been trying to find him," Will growled. He felt very much like a wolf was backing him into a corner. There was only so far he could back up until he needed to strike. "You're so concerned about these bodies, what's different about them?"

"Shouldn't I be the one asking *you* that?" Jack demanded. He was astonished by Will's audacity; that much was blindingly clear. "They're innocent people, Will. There doesn't have to be something different about them. The point is that we have a mad man on the loose, and I'm not sure if you're trying to find him anymore."

"Of course I'm trying to find him!" Will snapped. He had lashed out like he knew that he would, and now the tension was palpable in the air. Three sets of eyes stared wide at Will, horrified and simultaneously amazed that he stood up for himself.

The fourth pair of eyes narrowed at him. "Get out," Jack said. He was calm enough to make any outsider think there had been no spat at all.

Will didn't need Jack to tell him twice. He took his first opportunity to get out of there. He was halfway down the hall before he heard loud footsteps behind him. Will wanted to keep going, but he made himself stop.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Graham?” Jack accused. He was in Will’s space, far closer than Will liked any person to be. He took a step back, but Jack made sure to take a step forward. “You’ve never lashed out like that before.”

“It’s been a rough day,” Will mumbled. He was avoiding Jack completely, going so far as to turn his head entirely away from the other man. He couldn’t handle the dangerous situation that begged for him to slug his boss right in the jaw.

“It’s been a rough day,” Jack repeated with a cynical flare. “I’m sorry, Mr. Graham. I’m sorry it’s been a rough day.” His voice was anything but pitying. His whole frame was dripping with disbelief. “You know who’s had a really, really rough day?” he asked. A rhetorical question; Will knew better than to answer. “Those three dead people!” Jack yelled.

Will flinched.

“You know who’s had a rough day?” he continued, gradually becoming louder and more forceful. “The elderly parents of that young woman. They got some fantastic news today, Graham! The news that a serial killer who has been at large for over a decade murdered their daughter. Do you know how that makes me look?”

Will rolled his eyes. Apparently, he hadn’t hidden the action as well as he thought because he heard Jack’s unbelieving scoff soon after.

“Do you know how it makes me look, Graham?”

“It makes you look like someone who doesn’t care,” Will said. He was doing his best to imitate Hannibal’s constantly stoic external appearance. He was seething, but he didn’t need to let Jack know that he was affected so much by his words. “And it’s not exactly an image that’s hard to draw up,” he added, just to needle at Jack some more. Maybe he would get fired. Maybe he could live out the rest of his days with his dogs and his hallucinations. Will wouldn’t mind a visit from Elnias right about then. The stag could offer him some backup—no one would dare to mess with him when he had a thirteen-foot creature standing guard behind him.

“And what makes you say that, William Graham?” Jack drawled.

Will felt like a child again, being scolded by his dad. It was only when he was in big trouble that his dad used his full name, and this situation was no different.

“What makes you think that I don’t care?” Jack was back to calm and believably not-angry. Will knew better than to let his guard down. “What don’t I care about, Will? Those people? The murder victims of the Chesapeake Ripper? The families of the victims of the Chesapeake Ripper?” He paused and let his words linger in the air for the longest time. “*You*?”

“Alana Bloom and Dr. Lecter would argue that exactly,” Will said.

“Using them to hide behind, are we?” Jack sneered. “You’ve got a brain, Will; maybe you should start to use it for yourself.”

“This is exactly my point,” Will growled. Will couldn’t help curling his nose in disgust. Jack Crawford was starting to get on his nerves. “I do what I can, Jack, but I’m not some show pony. I don’t dance on command for your friends. It’s not an on and off switch. If there’s nothing for me to see, then I won’t *see* anything.”

“What evidence do you need?” Jack pressed.

“Maybe a lead? I don’t know!” Will snapped. Jack was aggravating him beyond belief. He needed to leave. Every fiber of his body was begging for him to take the *flight* route before he took the *fight* route. “There’s *nothing* in that room for me to use. He killed three more people; he took their organs while they were still alive, and now he’s making a beautiful liver pâté at his house!”

“He’s eating them?” Jack asked, suddenly intrigued once more. “Why do you think that?”

“Why else, Jack? Why else would he take the same organs over and over again? He has an expansive array of recipes, but he doesn’t have a taste for the most orthodox kind of meats,” Will explained. “He’s not a chef, but he’s very good at what he does. No one who ate it would know the difference.”

Only then did Jack relax his shoulders. He was no longer looming over Will, giving him space to breathe if only for a few seconds. Jack put his hand on Will’s shoulder and gave him an affirmative pat.

“That's all for today, Will,” Jack said.

Will jerked away from Jack’s hand, but not before it had seared a bitter mark into his skin.

There were words left unspoken between them. Will could hear something about a show pony with a nice set of tricks, or a light switch that needed a little bit of finagling to work. Will decided to take Jack's words as his peculiar way of saying "thanks".

Jack turned away and headed back the way he came. Will stood for a few more moments in silence and then left.

Will's house was blissfully quiet when he got home. He was too tired to think about the day’s events more than he needed to. He fought with his boss; his lectures were worse than usual, and he was still in an inconceivable amount of pain.

Will gulped down three ibuprofens from the pill bottle stashed in his bathroom cabinet. Will returned to the kitchen and decided he was not hungry. Will poured himself a drink instead; it was infallible logic, alcohol in the place of food. Will left the warm shelter of his house to sit outside on the porch. The first few chills of winter were nipping at his raw feet, and Will thought of his dream for the hundredth time that evening.

Will thought of Elnias, who had looked so mournful as he held the imaginary body of his prince. What was his name? Ruben? Will wasn’t sure. The little boy who lived with

absolutely no pain in his life, only to die from curiosity. It was sad; Will could admit that. It wasn't a story meant for children. Briefly, Will wondered how it would feel not to know what the sensations around him were. He imagined what he would do if he had no idea that he needed to eat food and drink water.

Will felt sorry for the prince.

When the dogs were done playing and lounging for the evening, Will wrangled them all inside and changed into his nightclothes.

He was seconds from falling asleep when there was a rustling from his kitchen. Will glanced over at the dogs to his right; Winston was the only one not accounted for. If Will closed his eyes, maybe he could will away the strange noises. That was how Peter Pan lived; he believed in everything so much that it became true. Why couldn't Will do the same?

Will, with a groan, sat up and trudged to his kitchen. There was a scraping on his ceiling and the shuffling of large objects trying to move around smaller objects. He would have brought a shotgun if he thought it was anything other than a raccoon or skunk that snuck in.

In his kitchen was anything other than a raccoon or skunk.

Familiar, gargantuan antlers trailed along his wooden ceiling. Where Elnias was not so careful, he gouged the wood in a horrible way. He crouched in Will's tiny house, bent in half at the waist and then some at his knees. Winston was in front of Elnias, less threatened this time than the night before. He was unsure and skittered away whenever Elnias tried to reach out and pet him, but he sniffed at the faun curiously.

"What are you doing here?" Will asked. His voice was hoarse and tender with sleep deprivation.

Elnias's head swiveled like that of an owl as he turned to look at Will. A grin broke out on his features, and he stood as much as he could without damaging anything. Will watched with a little ache in his heart as one particular point of an antler dug into his roof.

"Your Highness, my dear prince," Elnias purred. "I have been waiting for you to return to this home."

"Why were you waiting for me?" Will asked. "Last time, I had to come to you."

"Because I wanted to see what you would do," Elnias explained. "Now I am certain of who you are; I cannot ask that my prince seeks me out personally. It would be horribly rude of me. No, Prince Ruvyn, I will find you from now on." His murky eyes turned to Will's feet, and his brows furrowed. "You must take better care of yourself," he scolded.

Will truly felt for a moment as though he were the young prince in the care of Elnias.

"Sit," the faun instructed. Elnias gestured to one of the dining table chairs in Will's kitchen.

Will did as Elnias told him. Elnias shuffled to crouch in front of Will. Behind where he walked, little rolls of shaved ceiling fell to the floor. Elnias reached into the container

strapped to his hip and pulled out a jar.

“Where are the fairies?” Will asked. He was surprised at his disappointment when he didn’t see the fairies leap out of their carrying case.

“They are using this time to rest,” Elnias said. “They have boundless energy, but even those who do not tire must sleep on occasion.”

Will wasn’t sure if Elnias directed his comment at him, or if it was a coincidence.

Elnias unscrewed the cap of the jar, pulling it open with a gratifying *pop!*. “The crushed bones of fairies went into making this,” Elnias said. “Mixed with the blood of parasitic toads. Both dangerous creatures, but when killed and combined in the right ways, can have excellent healing properties.”

Will felt a flash of fear shoot through his heart. Were the fairies truly resting, or had they died for Will’s sake?

Elnias tipped the glass jar upside down, and Will watched in horror as a dark sludge oozed out of the jar and into Elnias’s palm. However, he did not stop Elnias as the stag took hold of his ankle, and lifted his foot. Once more, Will was amazed at the finesse that Elnias had with his claws and fingers. His lightly-furred fingers were as soft as silk—Will could only imagine that the rest of Elnias’s body was just as soft.

His fingers looked anything but gentle, but as Elnias spread the ooze onto the bottom of Will’s foot, he was cautious like the nature of a real deer. He did the same with Will’s other foot, and then brought forth a roll of glittering cloth from his seemingly endless container.

“A bandage woven from spider legs and caterpillar silk,” he said as if it was obvious. Will could not think of anything less common than spider legs and caterpillar silk made into fancy Band-Aids. Elnias wrapped the cloth around Will’s foot, and when the cloth sealed with the ooze, Will’s pain vanished. It was as good as getting a shot of numbing agent right to his feet, but without the needle aspect of it.

Elnias helped Will to test his range of motion with his feet, and then set Will’s feet on the floor again.

“Keep them wrapped for twelve hours,” he instructed. “Do not take the bandages off before then, or you will be in excruciating pain. You can take them off afterward, but it can be a mess.” Elnias looked up at Will and gave a fleeting smile. “It makes me feel good, to know that I am helping you once again.”

“Thank you,” Will said. He wasn’t sure what else he could say to Elnias. “You didn’t have to come all the way out here just for that,” Will said, glancing at his feet.

Elnias made a strange noise then. It was a low rumble in his throat, that sprang forth and became a bleat of joy. Perhaps it was laughter?

“Silly prince,” Elnias tutted. “I did not come here with the intent of healing you, but I will aid my prince however he needs it. No,” he continued, sitting back comfortably. “I came to ask how you will be tackling your first task.”

“My first task?” Will parroted.

Elnias’s brow furrowed. “Do you not remember the book that I gifted to you?” He asked. “Surely you must still have it, for it was nowhere in the forest.”

Elnias stood as tall as Will’s low ceiling would allow, and spun in a circle.

“Ah!” Elnias exclaimed, spotting something on the counter.

Will was positive that there was nothing there, but Elnias picked up a book from the counter. It looked incredibly familiar; it had to be the same book from Will’s dream.

If Will remembered correctly, it was the book that needed blood to be satisfied.

Elnias extended his arm, and Will took the book from him. He flipped to the first page and found it to be blank. It was all giving Will a horrible sense of déjà vu.

“You must complete your tasks frequently, my prince,” the faun said. “There are only fifteen days left, and some of these tasks will take more time than you would first think. Should you not complete the tasks, you will never be able to return. What would I do then?” he asked with an appalled tilt of his head. “I have waited centuries just for you, Your Highness. I do not want all of my efforts to go to waste. Nor do I want to see you die as you did before.” Elnias let his eyes roam over Will, pondering what exactly could persuade the prince. “These tasks are difficult, dear prince. There is no way for me to put that kindly, but they are worth it. I want you to live a life that is free of pain. One that is eternal. You will know no sorrow, my prince. Nor will you know what it is like to feel pain, or cold, or have your skin burned. None of these things will happen to you ever again.”

To Will, it all sounded too good to be true.

He waited for a long time, fighting with himself internally before he could decide what to say. “It only takes one drop of blood, right?” Will asked. He looked up at Elnias for confirmation. Should his throat be slit right then and there, Will was not sure if he would be upset or relieved.

“Only one,” Elnias assured.

Elnias held out his palm, and Will was only too willing to offer up his own hand.

Gentle as ever, Elnias used one of his exceedingly long claws and to prick Will’s finger. Blood welled to the surface immediately, but it was no worse than having his blood sugar tested at a hospital.

Elnias turned over Will’s hand, and they both watched as the drop fell and hit the open page of the book.

Chapter End Notes

Let's just pretend I'm uploading this three hours from now when it will actually be Monday.

The First Trial

Will stared at his drop of blood, waiting for anything to happen. Elnias, still with him, wrapped Will's finger in the cloth of spider legs and caterpillar silk. The blood stopped almost immediately, but Will didn't notice.

He watched as the blood on the page multiplied into an absurd amount of blood. The pages of the book soaked it in. The paper drew the blood across grooves and divots, but never long enough for Will to truly make out what he was seeing.

"Why isn't it working?" he asked. Will shut the cover of the book, thinking that maybe it needed a few moments to take in the blood.

When he looked up, Elnias was gone. There wasn't a trace of him left, aside from Will's wrapped feet and finger. Those and the little shavings of wood left all over the floor from his razor sharp antlers.

Winston was back where he belonged, in the pile of other dogs. Will probably should have gone back to bed, but his thoughts were being repeatedly pulled back to the book in his lap. He wanted desperately to know if the blood worked.

Will flipped open the book to the first page and was taken aback by what he saw.

Where once there had been a blank page, there were now images drawn in an ancient, classical style. The text that framed the pictures was in the same, historical-type font. Will could not think of any font in Word that would give him an appearance quite like this. He was expecting it all to be red, but there were countless colors and the text faded from gray to black where the author had run out of ink on occasion.

Will ran his fingers over the ink, but it was all dry.

If someone had shown him this, he would not have thought it came to life with just one drop of blood.

If he was honest with himself, Will was astounded that the book only needed one drop to work.

Will glimpsed the digital clock out of the corner of his eyes. Midnight exactly. What could go wrong? He stroked his fingers over the pages one more time before he started to read.

A long, long time ago, the Underground Kingdom was full of creatures that lived harmoniously with one another. There were creatures that made the flowers grow and creatures that made the flowers die. Some animals only ate grapes and apples, while others ate their fellow creatures.

The king at the time, as ancient as time itself, allowed for this to take place. He understood the balance of his kingdom. With this understanding, he knew that both sides of the scale

needed to be even. Those that took more than they needed or deserved were banished or killed. No one in the kingdom protested this, for they thought that it was just and true.

This system would have gone on forever, were it not for the toads.

The toads were greedy creatures that spied on the king and learned his plans. They did not like the idea that if they wanted to eat and when they wanted it, that the king would punish them. The toads thought that this was woefully unfair.

In a series of events first claimed as accidents, the toads began to steal from the kingdom. They took energy, life, and food. They ate to fill their ravenous appetites and then ate more. There was no satisfying the toads.

The king decided, with a grave heart, that he should banish the toads from the kingdom. He scattered them all over the human world so that none would be able to congregate and form an uprising in a world that would not be able to handle the gluttony and greed.

Over time, the toads became stupid.

They acted just as regular animals in the human world acted. They ate what they needed, and moved along. They feared humans and were eaten mercilessly by their predators. To survive, they took to hiding. The king would have invited them back to the kingdom, but he feared that their greed ran too deep in their bones.

Only one toad survived the genocide.

He took to living beneath a tree far, far underground. He eats what he pleases, and is not satisfied by anything less than what he wants. He has a hunger that is insatiable, for he thinks only of himself.

His poison killed the tree that he lived beneath, and there is little to no hope for the tree left.

To the right of the text, there was an entire page taken up by a drawing of the toad. It was massive compared to the child that crawled up to it.

Inside the toad's belly, rests the key that you need. Offer the toad three magic stones, and they will kill him. Take the key, and proceed onto your next task.

Will was jarred out of his reading, barely realizing that the words on the page had shifted to speak directly to Will and tell him what to do. He examined the drawing carefully, from the appearance of the magical stones, and all the way to the dead tree. It wasn't something that he recognized, but he didn't have any doubts that he couldn't find it. After all, Elnias told him that the fairies would help him, and surely they knew where the dead tree and the toad were.

The only thing Will didn't know was how he was supposed to find the magic stones to kill the toad. Would any stones work, or did they need to be magical?

Will closed the book and set it on his kitchen table. It was just after two a.m., and he desperately needed to sleep. Despite how wired he was, Will found that his body was exhausted. Nothing sounded better than sleep at that moment.

His feet were cushioned by downy pillows as he walked. Will could not imagine just how badly they hurt earlier that day. Will could convince himself that he was making it up the whole time, judging by how painless walking felt now.

Will stretched out on his bed and closed his eyes.

The next thing he knew; his alarm was going off.

Will roused himself from sleep and sat up. He was tired, but not as much as usual. He had gotten four solid hours of sleep, and that was more than he usually got. Will went through his morning routines as usual. He only stopped when he entered his kitchen. Will examined the grooves in the wood on his ceiling, noticing just how deep they were now that it was light out. He turned to the book next and opened it to the first page.

There was nothing there.

Will furrowed his eyebrows and thumbed through all of the pages. What did he see last night? Was it a hallucination? Will was confident he had seen something on the pages. There was no other explanation for the idea in his head that he needed to kill a toad from a magical kingdom underground.

Will shook his head. It had to be another hallucination trying to trick him.

Will dressed, put on his shoes, and stepped outside. His shoe crunched down on something, and Will was briefly scared that it was a dog's paw or some other critter that came looking to his house for help.

When Will lifted his foot, he saw a small velvet pouch on his porch. Will stooped to pick it up and dumped the contents into his hand. The velvet was as soft as Elnias's fur, and from the pouch fell three perfectly round stones. They looked like marbles, only larger and without a single imperfection.

Offer him three magical stones, and they will kill him.

A chittering caught Will's attention. He looked to his left, and there sat one of the little fairies. It was fluorescent pink, with dark brown eyes. The fairy smiled and chittered again at Will.

"Are these the magic stones?" Will asked. He showed the fairy the three stones, and it flew over to look at them.

The fairy perched on Will's wrist and took its time to examine each of the stones individually. After thoroughly scrutinizing each one, the fairy nodded gleefully and chittered some more.

“Where is the toad?” Will asked. “Is it somewhere close by? The book told me that I need to kill it.”

The fairy nodded and lifted off from Will’s wrist. It flew a few feet away, towards Will’s backyard, and then doubled back. Will was starting to appreciate the impatience of the fairies. He liked how they flew back to him regularly as if begging him to get off his ass already.

Will stood up and followed the fairy. The velvet pouch was tucked safely away in his back pocket as he walked. He was grateful for his shoes this time. Will had a feeling that this was not going to be a short walk. At the front door, Winston begged and whined to get out, but Will didn’t turn back. He didn’t like the sound of the toad, and he didn’t want his dog to be eaten by it. Will did not know what he would do with himself if his actions hurt Winston.

All thoughts of Will’s job were forgotten. Surely it would not take that long to find and kill a toad.

Will had no idea just how wrong he was.

By midday, with the sun high above him and the fairy, Will was still walking. The fairy, tired from flying so much, took a spot on Will’s shoulder. It grabbed onto the cloth of his flannel shirt and pointed him in the right direction if Will wandered off course. Will was thankful for the thicker shirt he chose that morning. It was getting closer and closer to winter, and he could see each cloud of breath as he exhaled. Will was starving, but he pressed on in hopes that he and the fairy would arrive at the dead tree soon. Will hoped that someone had covered for his lectures that day. He assumed Alana would have taken the job in place of him.

Should he have called and let someone know that he wasn’t going to show up? Will pawed at his pockets, but his phone wasn’t on him. He looked over his shoulder, but it was far too late to turn back now. Overhead, clouds were beginning to gather on the edges of the sky. By the end of the day, it would be raining heavily.

Will had a renewed sense of energy burst through his body, spurred on by the hope that the rain would not soak him to the bone walking home if he walked faster now.

Will and the fairy did not arrive at their destination until late in the afternoon. The clouds were gathering thicker as the seconds ticked by. In the distance, Will could hear the rumble of thunder. Occasionally, he could see lightning as it cracked across the sky.

The tree was much smaller than Will imagined it being. From the pictures in the book, he thought it would be towering above him and into the sky. There were no leaves on the tree, and each of the branches was beginning to sag with death. The air around the tree was cumbersome and saturated with negative energy that Will did not like. He wanted to turn and run back, trials and immortality be damned.

The fairy on Will’s shoulder clicked and tutted in a nervous way. Will reached up and gave a reaffirming pat on the top of the fairy’s head. Not reassured at all, the little creature scooted closer to Will’s neck. It clung onto the fabric of his shirt collar for dear life.

Will approached the dying tree and looked at the gaping hole that separated it nearly in half. Will hesitated for one more second, doubts coursing through his mind faster than he could register them, and then slid himself down the hole.

For some reason, Will was picturing a gentle slope into the toad's underground layer.

Will slid down the steep fall into the underbelly of the tree at an alarming speed, his expectations of a peaceful ride down going unmet. At some point, he hit a branch or a root, and his whole body flipped. Will, rather ungracefully, rolled and tumbled the rest of the way down the slope, until he smacked into the ground.

Sore all over, Will did not think about moving until his world stopped spinning around him. Will sat up and spat out a mouthful of mud. It was still clinging to his teeth, and he brought his sleeve up to try and rub the dirt out of his mouth.

Will gave up on that thought almost immediately. The same goopy mud caked his entire sleeve.

"Are you alright?" Will asked when he heard the little fairy whimper.

The fairy moved down Will's arm cautiously until it sat in Will's open palm. He could see the tears heavy in the fairy's eyes before he could figure out why. Will pieced it together slowly, from the crying to the lack of flying.

The poor thing's wings were mangled and frayed, damaged by the fall. Will felt a tug at his heartstrings, imagining just how painful it must have been. Will gently pet the fairy's arm with the back of his finger.

"I'll take you to Elnias once we finish here," Will said.

The fairy whimpered, and Will couldn't tell if it was grateful or scared.

Will opened the pocket on the front of his shirt and brought the fairy to it. Without any complaints—since the box Elnias carried around was so similar to a pocket—the fairy slipped into place. Will left it unbuttoned.

No longer quite as dazed from the fall, Will took in his surroundings. High above him was the hole in the tree, barely lit up from the dim light outside. All around Will were muddy walls just tall enough for him to crawl through. There was a mix of mud and some ooze on the ground, creating a slimy and sickening combination.

Will had one of three tunnels to choose from. The fairy had no particular interest in any of the three, so Will opted to follow the one on the right.

He trudged through the mud on his hands and knees, having to jump back a few times when the mud tried to suck him in.

At one point, a huge pill bug crawled up Will's arm. He panicked and tried to bat it away, all too used to hallucinations of bugs all over him. The insect smacked against the wall and then

crawled along on its way. Will swiped away as many of the bugs as he could, which were turning more frequent by the second, but eventually, he gave up.

He must have found a nest during his wandering because there were millions of the little bugs swarming on the ground. Will forced himself to keep going, and moved through the crawling mess.

Will didn't like that there was only the one type of bug, but he supposed he should be overjoyed. He would not have known what to do if the place had been crawling with scorpions and centipedes just wanting to bite him to pieces.

The wandering took its toll on Will's body. His knees were sore, and the scattered rocks in the mud cut through his jeans. The palms of his hands were bloody and painful. Will didn't want to think about the possibility of the mud being infectious and harming him more.

Just when Will was ready to give up, all of the roly-poly bugs sprang into action. They skittered away like one large river, heading in front of Will as fast as their teeny legs would carry them. Even the bugs on Will were trying to get away. Will was tempted to keep going and ignore the danger behind him, but he knew that wasn't the way to get what he needed.

Will turned around as best as he could in the thin tunnel, which was harder than he first thought.

In front of him, with its throat rapidly expanding and contracting, sat the toad.

The toad was gigantic and took up the entire tunnel with its body. It was a wonder how its tiny, rail-thin legs held up its massive body. The toad examined Will with a judgmental look. It disapproved of this stranger inside of its home, scaring away its prey.

Will did not know what he was supposed to say to the massive creature.

The toad took advantage of the silence.

A horrible *schlup* preluded the frog's tongue leaping out of its mouth. The long appendage struck Will's cheek and stuck on there for quite a while before returning to the mouth of the toad. The fairy in Will's shirt pocket screamed in terror. Will recoiled away from the extreme action.

"Jesus Christ!" he exclaimed, wiping his cheek. The same goop that coated and mixed with the mud throughout the tunnels clung to Will's cheek and his hair in dripping globs. "Toad spit," he muttered. "I've been crawling through toad spit for hours."

As if it could understand Will, the toad gave a rumble deep in its throat. He had caught a meal and managed to pester this intrusion in his territory.

"Aren't you sick of it?" Will scoffed, looking over the toad.

Will sat back on his heels and began digging into the back pocket of his jeans. Luckily, the velvet pouch had stayed with him through the journey. Will poured the magic stones into his mud-crusted palm.

“All you do is crawl under here eating bugs day after day,” he scorned. “Scaring and probably eating your visitors and killing this tree.” Will looked over the toad.

It was wholly unimpressed with his speech.

“It’s not right,” Will continued. He inched towards the toad. The lumbering creature did not move. “You take what isn’t yours. You’re only concerned with yourself. Do you know how many people you’re hurting, just to satisfy your needs alone?” Will asked.

The toad gave a disapproving rumble. The frog looked at the stones in Will’s palm and then looked away. This game was starting to bore him.

Will did not know what to do. Apparently trying to talk sense into this thing wasn’t working. The fairy squealed in his pocket, begging for Will to be done with this already. If he wasn’t quick, they were both going to turn into toad lunch. Will had no doubts that the toad could eat him in one gulp.

Only then did Will notice that some of the bugs on the ground had curled into little balls inside of their shells. He opened his palm and looked at the stones. They were about the same size as the rolled-up bugs.

“If you had any friends, they wouldn’t be your friends,” Will growled. He couldn’t help but feel that he was unfairly taking his problems out on the toad. “You would only use them as stepping stones. That’s all anyone is to you, a stepping stone to get to where you need to be.” Will furrowed his thick eyebrows. “And I’m going to put a stop to it,” he said, determined. “You’re not going to hurt anyone else if I’ve got anything to say about it.”

Will picked up a few of the rolled-up bugs. He gave them a brief moment of feeling sorry for them, before holding them out mixed in with the magical stones.

“I am Prince Ruvyn, and you are going to stop hurting this tree and the bugs that live here,” Will growled. The same *schlup*, and then the toad’s strange tongue stuck to Will’s hand. There was the weirdest feeling of an intense suction, like putting his hand in the mouth of a vacuum pipe, before the toad’s tongue went back into his mouth. “I’m sure that even if they weren’t bugs, that’s all you would see them as.”

Will watched as the toad settled onto his haunches, pleased with the meal that Will gave him. It did not take long before there was a look of horror that crossed the toad’s eyes. It belched in a way that sounded unpleasant and uncomfortable. One more belch from the toad, only this one had it expelling something that looked rather like intestines.

The bloody organs rolled out of the frog’s mouth and onto the ground in front of him. If Will was not so intrigued—in a grossed-out way—he had no doubts that he would have been vomiting too.

The toad continued to expel all of its organs until there was blood leaking from nearly its entire face. Will could no longer see the eyes of the toad, covered completely in the dark, sticky blood. At last, the toad vomited up its stomach and heart and died. With nothing left inside of its body, the toad collapsed into itself like a deflated balloon.

Will stared for a while longer before reminding himself what his task was after killing the frog. Will reached into his pocket and grabbed his knife, one that he always carried with him. He dug through the pile of steaming organs until he found the stomach of the toad. There was something under the thick lining of the organ, desperate to get out.

Will, as careful as he could be with his knife, carved back the stomach lining. From the gaping hole, burst ten thousand of bugs that had been eaten but not fully digested. Once the bugs were cleared out, a tiny bird shoved its way out of the stomach lining of the toad. It looked hurt and horrified about what had happened to it.

Thinking of his fairy friend, and of his dogs back at home, Will offered one hand to the bird. It cheeped and tried to shuffle away from Will, but it was too weak to get away from him. With his other hand, Will coerced the bird into his palm.

“It’s okay,” he promised the small bird in a soothing voice. Birds weren’t his expertise, but how different from dogs could they be? “You’re still alive, little bird,” he said. Will, lucky that he had two pockets on his shirt front, opened the other.

He brought the bird to it, but it was still hesitant. Will let it assess the danger before slipping into what seemed to be a warm, safe place to hide. Not quite sure how he had come out of this ordeal with a new pet bird, Will stuck his hand into the gaping wound in the toad’s stomach. He searched around until he found something hard and metallic inside the organ.

From the toad’s stomach, Will pulled an ancient and extensively decorated key. Will admired it for a second before shoving it into his back pocket.

The fairy and bird were still inside Will’s shirt pockets as he crawled out of the labyrinthine tunnels and out of the dying tree.

Outside, the thunder was much stronger. The sun was nowhere in sight, and the clouds were dark and thick enough to blot it out even if it was still in the sky. Will could smell the rain in the air, but he was hoping to get home with both little creatures dry.

Will was only halfway through his walk home, guided by the injured fairy when the rain started. At first, it was a drizzle, but then it became a downpour. Will sheltered the fairy and the bird as best as he could the rest of the way home. The rain soaked him through to the bone, and his body began to drip great globs of the spit-mud. Each joint in his body was weary, and Will was ready to collapse and fall asleep for the rest of his life.

When Will arrived at his house, none of the dogs had a second to spare for him. They were all over him for food and water and wanted nothing more than to be outside for a while, despite the rain.

Will rooted around his house for an old cage and lined it with warm blankets. He set the bird in there first, who cowered away from Will. Will had no ill feelings towards the tiny animal. He had saved it, but instincts convinced the bird that Will was a vicious predator.

Will took the fairy out of his other pocket and set it next to the bird in the cage.

“I’ll bring you to Elnias tomorrow,” Will promised. “I’m too tired tonight, I can’t make it. And you need rest,” he said.

The fairy seemed willing enough to accept the new deal. It watched the bird in the corner of the cage, slowly scooting over to it.

Will ground his teeth from side to side with nerves. “I don’t know what kind of fairy you are,” he began. The fairy turned and looked at Will. “There are lots of kinds of fairies in stories in our world. There’s some that love animals and take care of them, but there’s some that look cute like you, but will eat little birds like him in a heartbeat.” Will paused. “Please don’t eat him,” he said.

The fairy, who Will accepted by now could understand him, nodded. It moved as close to the bird as it was allowed, and reached out to pet the soft, damp feathers. The bird visibly tensed, and then relaxed with the gentle touches.

“I’ll bring you food and water,” Will said. The fairy nodded again.

Mushed up dog kibble could count as bird and fairy food, right? It was the best Will had to offer. He set about making it in his kitchen when the digital clock on his counter caught his eye. Eight a.m.? It was probably wrong.

Still soaked in mud and rain, Will finished making dog kibble into mushy bird food and brought it back. The fairy turned it down, but the bird was hungry enough to give it a try. Will brought a little dish of water, as well. The fairy nearly downed all of it before the bird had a chance to drink any of it.

Will allowed himself a smile at the sight and then left the two of them to themselves.

Will knew he should have taken a shower or at least cleaned himself off a little bit, but he was far too exhausted to bother. He set out towels on his bed and then crawled on top of them. He had enough spare sets of blankets and pillowcases that it wouldn’t matter if he permanently messed this set up with toad spit and mud.

The moment Will’s head hit the pillow, he was dead asleep.

Not even the sound of a car pulling into his driveway could wake him up.

The Book of Blood

Will only stirred when he heard a couple of the dogs scrabbling and pawing at the door. They were excited because of something on the other side. It wasn't a warning from them. No, it was more like they were greeting an old friend.

Seconds later, Will heard a *tap tap tap* on his door. If it had not been for the dogs, he wouldn't be awake at all. Every muscle in his body ached from his grueling journey to the tree of the toad and back again. He willed the person away, but he knew that whoever it was, was still there. They didn't knock again, and it gave Will a sinking feeling in his gut.

Hannibal.

Will's body was shaking like an earthquake, but he managed to stand up and get to the door. When Will opened the door, he was not surprised by Hannibal standing there in an immaculate, three-piece suit. The man had no sense of time; who in their right mind wore a suit this early in the morning?

What did surprise Will was the brief look of shock that passed over Hannibal's features. Hannibal's eyes scoured Will's appearance for a second, and then returned to his face. Will turned his own eyes away from the intense stare.

"Will, allow me to ask what on Earth has happened to you," Hannibal said. He didn't press forward; Alana or Jack would have shoved their way into Will's house without a second thought. "You look like Alice after she tumbled down the rabbit hole."

"Something like that," Will said.

He had almost forgotten about not taking a shower after returning from his adventure with the toad and the fairy. Will stepped to the side and motioned for Hannibal to come in.

Will missed the scrutinizing look that Hannibal gave his small home as he shut the door. It was more of a mess than usual, what with all of the mud drying everywhere and on everything. In its cage, the bird chirped at this new intrusion.

Hannibal meandered over to it, with Will right behind him. Will watched as Hannibal bent slightly at the waist to see the bird.

"I did not realize that your hobbies also included taking in injured birds," Hannibal mused.

"Normally they don't," Will offered.

"It seems as though today is anything but normal for you," Hannibal said.

Will nodded.

Will could see the fairy sleeping in the corner of the cage. It had one arm over the bird's back. If Hannibal saw the fairy, he didn't say anything about it. Somehow, Will found it more likely that Hannibal could not see the fairy at all.

Hannibal stood up to his full height, examined the room one last time, and then turned to look at Will. "You have not shown up to work in two days, Will," Hannibal said. "I assured Jack that you were perfectly fine, but no one is ready to believe that." Hannibal stepped closer to Will. "I am troubled by your appearance. Judging by the state of your house and your pets, you have not been home the entire two days."

"I was going to show up to work yesterday," Will said. He remembered that perfectly well. "But something came up."

"You do not look as if you have been fishing this whole time," Hannibal said.

"I wasn't going after fish in particular," Will replied.

"What were you looking for, Will?" Hannibal asked. He did not let Will answer. Hannibal didn't curl his nose, but Will could see the action perfectly. It was a polite way of letting Will know that he reeked horribly.

"I should take a shower," Will said. Surely Hannibal noticed how Will avoided the question, but he must have thought it better to let the subject drop for now.

"I could see it being something that would help you right about now," Hannibal agreed. "I can wait here and give you a ride into town."

"That's not necessary," Will argued. He was looking around for a towel, as well as the book Elnias gave him. Now that he had the key, he needed to see what his next challenge was. Will didn't think twice about so willingly stepping into another life-threatening trial. "I can drive perfectly well."

"Do you think that I am going to accept an answer like that after you have been missing for two days, Will?" Hannibal asked.

Will knew that Hannibal wouldn't. "Just give me a few minutes," Will pleaded.

Hannibal, seemingly pleased by this answer, ushered the dogs outside to sit with him on the porch. Will knew that Hannibal was not particularly fond of them, but he found himself appreciating the subtle privacy that Hannibal offered him.

Once Hannibal shut the door, Will snagged Elnias's book off the counter and went straight to the bathroom. Will closed the door behind him and waited for a few seconds. When he didn't hear the front door open again, or anything from outside other than barking, Will sat down on the closed lid of the toilet. He took his hunting knife out of his pocket and poked the tip of another finger. Will waited for the blood to well up and then opened the book. He let the drop fall and watched as it became an impossibly vast amount of ink that spread over the pages.

The images were just beginning to form when they began to run as if someone poured water over the wet ink. Will watched with wide eyes as the pages crumpled and seized. The storybook images that Will was expecting were not there. A raw depiction of lungs began to form, with two black, clawed hands wrapped around them.

Will's chest began to feel very tight.

The black hands squeezed down on the lungs, hard enough to puncture the delicate skin and let the air wheeze out. The maroon ink that formed the images dripped off the pages in a waterfall soaking Will's lap in blood.

Will doubled over and began hacking. His entire chest was on fire with pain. He could feel the hands around his lungs, squeezing all of the air out of him. Will slipped forward and onto the floor. His hands were unable to catch him, and his head cracked against the tile flooring of his bathroom.

Will was unable to stop coughing, despite the horrible pain in his chest. He wasn't sure if the blood all over his tile was from the book or his dribbling finger. Will could hear the dogs outside starting a frenzy; they knew that something was wrong with their owner.

Will could swear that an eternity passed before Hannibal was opening the door to his bathroom and looking down at him. Will couldn't read the expression on his face, but it certainly didn't look like concern for a friend who was coughing up blood on an even bloodier book.

For a moment, Will was outside of his body and looking down at himself. Will stared down at himself, watching as his pathetic, muddy body seized and contracted. The pain was scribbled all over his face and laced through his entire body. He looked insane, what with being covered in mud, clinging to an old, raggedy book, and now coughing up obscene amounts of blood and vomit.

Will knelt down and pressed his hand to his forehead. A fever. He pressed his hands to his other body's chest and sides, feeling his lungs as he breathed and wheezed. There was a struggling in both of them, and he didn't have a stethoscope, but he knew what was happening. A bad case of double pneumonia was more likely than not, considering his state of disarray.

Will kicked the door shut behind him, allowing no room for the dogs to try and nuzzle their way into the bathroom. He understood their concern, for they were just animals, but there was nothing for them to worry about.

Not yet.

Will unrolled a length of toilet paper and then grabbed his hunting knife from where it had fallen onto the bathroom floor. He was careful not to leave a single fingerprint as he flicked open the blade, and saw the blood already there. Was this all there was to it? He was making this game far too easy for himself.

“What to do with you?” Will pondered. He continually flicked the blade open and closed. Will glanced at himself on the floor, watching as consciousness slipped from his grasp. Even passed out, he was hacking and wheezing away.

Will closed the blade and grabbed the book instead. All of the pages were blank, and it smelled horribly of mildew and mold. Will curled his nose, but was more interested than not by this book. On the worn leather cover was the face of a stag, with wide antlers that wandered off the edges of the cover.

How fascinating.

Will felt himself drifting. His body was nothing more than a burden to his mind. Will couldn’t think clearly through the muddle of voices and sounds. At some points, he could hear mumbling all around him. Will reached out towards the words and felt a hand clasp around his own.

The queen from his dreams was watching him with big, concerned eyes. “It’s okay,” she murmured. “You’re going to be just fine. We’ll take care of you, and make sure this doesn’t happen again.” Will could see the tears forming at the edges of her eyes. She tried to blink them away, but she was unsuccessful.

Will wanted to tell her that he was sorry. He didn’t know what he had done to make her so upset, but he didn’t think it was fair to see such a pretty creature crying so desperately.

When she pulled away, Will’s world vanished with her.

He tried to get up multiple times, but his body allowed him little to no movement. That or weight would be put on his chest. His lungs were still on fire, but it was nowhere near as bad as it had been in his bathroom after reading the book.

Will couldn’t remember the images that he saw on the pages. What was he going to do about his next task? Surely Elnias would be upset with him. The faun wanted nothing more than to see Will succeed, but it didn’t seem likely. Will allowed the weight to act as an anchor for him, and he drifted off with the reassuring weight pressing down on him.

When Will woke up—truly woke up—he could not wrap his head around what he was looking at. There was a pattern above him, even and perfectly aligned. He wasn’t sure if there were dots scattered across his vision or the tiles above him.

Will could feel an aching in his bones as he turned to look at his surroundings. Will realized right away where he was, but it took a while for his sleep-muddled brain to put the pieces together. A hospital. He could hear the rhythmic beeping of the machines around him. As if on cue, the blood pressure cuff tightened around his upper arm. The pain was brief, but enough to leave his body weakened once more.

Will scanned the room. No one was with him. He wasn't sure if that made him feel better or worse about being in a hospital.

Each of his muscles protested, shaking like earthquakes, but Will sat up in the bed. He was in a hospital gown and had no trace of mud left in him. Will raised his arm but found the motion cut short. His wrists were in padded leather cuffs, binding him to the sides of the bed. Both of his wrists were wrapped tightly in a bright white bandage.

"Hello?" Will called, but his voice was weak. He sounded like a mouse from a Don Bluth film. Weak and trembling and ready to collapse at any moment.

When the shadows across his room began to move, Will felt the panic rise in his chest. The monstrous lumping of darkness was prowling closer toward him. Will wanted to scream, but he felt compelled to let the shadows do as they wished. If it was a murderer come to kill him, then so be it.

No murderer appeared from the shadows, only a faun with flickering ears and bristling fur.

"Elnias," Will whispered.

The faun moved forward in an instant and wrapped his long arms around Will's shoulders. He brought his prince in for a gentle hug, shushing him quietly.

"You must remain calm, Your Highness," Elnias begged. His voice was rasping with exhaustion, sounding much like Will's voice. "I have very little time to say what I need to say, and then be gone."

"You can't leave," Will demanded. "I have the key from the toad," he said. Will shifted around in the hospital bed, to see if he could feel the key. He furrowed his brow, not sure where it had gone.

From his container for the fairies, and everything else in the world, Elnias pulled out the key from the toad's belly. "I have it, Prince Ruvyn," Elnias said. "It was at your home with your companions. They were anxious for you, and so was your little bird."

A familiar pink fairy poked its head out of the container and chittered at Will.

"I found her, injured and scared in a cage with the bird," Elnias explained. His ears swished down, an anxious motion. "Why was she in a cage, Prince Ruvyn?" he asked. His tone hardened; he was upset with Will.

"She was hurt when we fell," Will said. "I was going to bring her to you the next night, but I don't remember doing it."

"That is because you did not," Elnias said. He stalked away from Will, towards the door of his hospital room. Elnias looked around the hallway, and then returned to Will's side. "You have been missing for many days, my prince. I have looked for you all over, but I could not find you. Do you know how close the full moon is?" he asked.

Will could very clearly hear the impatient anger in Elnias's voice. "I was brought here. I think I became sick after killing the toad. There was nothing I could do about it, Elnias," Will explained.

"That is no excuse!" Elnias snapped. His voice turned into a threatening growl as he prowled back to Will's bedside. "If you were sick, you need but tell me. I could have saved this from happening. You could be with us already, where you belong!" Elnias shuffled around in his container and brought out a vial filled with viscous, bright blue goo. "Drink this," he instructed.

Elnias uncapped the vial and tipped it up to Will's lips. Without question, Will swallowed the acrid contents of the bottle. Immediately, a fire spread through his body, but only for a few seconds. When the flames died out, Will's chest was no longer in pain.

"I am your caretaker," Elnias scorned. He flapped his hands in agitation. "Not these humans. They do not know how to care for your body! They think that you are human, but you are not," he snapped. Elnias waved his hands and paced back and forth across the room. "You should not have asked for the help of that monster," Elnias said with a scowl.

"What do you mean?" Will asked. Seeing Elnias so worked up was making him anxious.

"That—that man!" Elnias spat. He snarled fiercely, a sound that would send any human running for their life. "He is just like all other humans; he thinks only of himself. Look, Prince Ruvyn, look and see what he did to you."

"Are you saying that Hannibal did this?" Will pressed. Hannibal's was the first name he thought of. He was the only human that had been to Will's house, as far as he knew. Will briefly wondered when he stopped considering himself human.

"What does his name matter?" Elnias asked. He turned to Will and strode to his bedside. "They are all the same, as I have told you many times. You cannot trust them, Your Highness." Elnias bowed low. "You must only trust me, for I am who will save you when you need it. These other humans, they do not understand you." His voice was transforming, from a burning anger to a soft pleading. "You must trust me; they do not know the harm that they can bring you."

Will hesitated. "I'm sorry," he said. There was nothing else that he could say.

All at once, Elnias's demeanor changed. He stood and gave Will a gentle smile. "Look at you, Your Highness. Apologizing again to me. You need to break that habit of yours. This is no fault of your own."

Will's tongue itched to say 'I'm sorry' again, but he held the words back.

"Now, young prince," Elnias began once more, "we must free you from these bonds. There are but five days until the full moon and we are running short of time." Elnias crouched near Will's bedside and examined the cuffs that held him down. He then began to search through his container, his hands returning with a mountain of small keys. "Your next task will be the most challenging of the three," Elnias said. "I have the book so that you can know what you

must do, but there is no time to prepare yourself." Elnias gave him a serious look. "You must do exactly as the book says," he instructed. "Should you deviate; you may become trapped forever. Should you do anything that is not written, you may lose your life."

"What about the toad?" Will asked.

"You need only the key from his stomach," Elnias said.

Elnias flicked through his pile of keys until he found one that stood out. Elnias slipped the key into the slots in Will's cuffs and freed him of his bindings. Will flexed his arms and stretched his shoulders. He could not move his wrists as freely as he would like, so he left them alone.

Elnias pawed through his container and brought forward the book and the key for Will. He set both of them down on Will's lap, looking deep into Will's eyes with his inky maroon ones.

"You must be careful, my prince," he whispered. Elnias moved his hands to a buckle near the container and unhooked it. He set the holder-for-everything on the bedside table near Will. "I will loan you my friends, again," he said. Elnias stood up, more careful now about his antlers, and backed a step away from Will. "Simply open it up, and they will fly to your rescue. Do not expect to find anything else in there, for your magic has not returned yet."

Will knew that a day ago, he would have questioned the idea that he possessed magical abilities. Now it was all coming in stride with the rest of this.

"I will be careful," Will promised.

"You will see a feast beyond your wildest dreams," Elnias continued. "You must not eat or drink anything. Not a single drop or the tiniest of bites! Doing so will end your life."

"Is the food poisonous?" Will asked.

Elnias shook his head. "No, Prince Ruvyn. There is something far more dangerous waiting for you than poison. There are but three rules, Your Highness. Do not eat, nor drink, nor speak. The book will show you."

Will held out his hand to Elnias. The faun took Will's tiny, pale hand in his own, and poked one of his fingers. Blood welled up immediately, and Will opened the book.

"Prince Ruvyn," Elnias murmured, staring intently at the bead of blood. "The creature that you will find in there is not like any other creature in this world. He is… Not human," Elnias warned.

"I'm not human, either," Will argued. "And neither are you. Or the fairies."

Elnias shook his head again. "It is not like that, Your Highness. You must understand. This creature is dangerous, and he will try to trick you. He can speak like a human, and he has a human face, but do not be fooled."

Will ingrained Elnias's warning into his brain.

Before the drop of blood fell, Elnias slunk back into the shadows and disappeared. Will felt his heartstrings tug for just a moment before he let his blood fall onto the pages of the book. Will closed it then and waited for the magic to happen.

In the meantime, Will unhooked himself from all of the monitors, and then unhooked the monitors from the walls. He wasn't stupid. Will stood from his bed and examined his room. On one of the chairs to his right, a change of clothes sat. He could not be sure if they were there the whole time, or if Elnias had brought him something to change into. While he was certain that he had time, Will changed into his clothes. It was a relief to be out of the ill-fitting hospital gown.

Will, on his short path back to the book on his bed, stopped when he saw his medical chart. He picked it up and flicked through the pages. The first few pages were nothing important. Blood results, urine results, those types of things.

Will blanched when he got to his reason for admission.

Attempted suicide.

Will didn't need to look at his wrists to know why a doctor needed to bandage them. But it didn't make sense. Thoughts swirled in Will's head, panic and confusion and paranoia. Had he tried to kill himself? Will couldn't remember anything after he came back home with the fairy. He killed the toad, rescued the bird, and came back.

Very vaguely, Will could remember Hannibal's presence. He could hear Elnias's words in his head. *Look, Prince Ruvyn, look and see what he did to you*, the faun spat. Disdain coursed through his words. Will wondered if Elnias knew something that he didn't.

Will continued looking through his papers. Double pneumonia, bruised ribs, high fever, lack of consciousness from fever and blood loss. Will could not read anymore. He set down the clipboard onto his bed and picked up the book. Will flipped through the pages until he was in the middle of the book.

There are creatures that are evil, and creatures that are good. Creatures that kill are not evil. Creatures that kill for joy are evil. When the king heard of a creature that was evil, he would banish it to another land. At first, as with the toads, he attempted to send the creature to the human world. The king thought that it would become scared and stupid, just as the toads did. He was very wrong.

In a world with prey that was dumber than him, the creature controlled everything. Children would fall for his façade. Adults were all too easy to fool, as well. There was no haven from this monster.

The king banished him to another realm altogether. There are no portals to this realm, and the king thought that he had spared the humans.

Humans, though, are inventive. They are too smart for their own good. When humans began drawing, they began to draw doors. Doors that would, hopefully, lead them away from their horrible lives. Little did they know that they were being taken somewhere far worse.

In the center of the words, was a drawing of a shadowy man. He had antlers like Elnias, but there was no friendliness depicted in the picture. Around the man, sat piles and piles of skulls. In his arms, he cradled a small body with no head.

Will felt himself shiver from the top of his head to the tips of his toes.

He continued to read.

With chalk, you can draw your own doorway. You have only fifteen minutes before the door will close, and lock you out forever. Should you be trapped in his lair, he will kill you.

The creature will talk to you. He will befriend you, but he will not attack you.

The rest was all that Elnias told Will. A feast, but Will was not to drink or eat any of it. Will summarized his task in his head; don't eat, drink, or talk. Use the key to open one of three doors behind the creature and secure his prize from the depths of another realm.

Will's stomach growled in protest at the thought of food.

In the fold between the pages, was a piece of black chalk. Will grabbed the chalk, and set the book down upon his hospital bed. Fifteen minutes. Will would be in and out before anybody noticed that he was gone.

Will buckled the strap of Elnias's fairy-holder, and put it on the way Elnias carried it. Will draped it over his opposite shoulder so that it would not slip off. Will could hear the fairies bustling about within their home as Will moved them from the table to his hip.

Will considered his options for a long moment before he approached one wall of his hospital room. Will drew a broad outline of door, wondering if he needed to include a door handle like in Beetlejuice. Just as he was about to draw a circle on one side of the door, there was a deep rumbling.

A light began to shine around the edges of Will's shoddy door. Will pressed his hands against the doorway and found that it pushed open easily enough. Will let the door open completely before he dared to poke his head inside and look around. A long hallway stretched in front of Will. It curved around and out of his sight.

Will glanced behind him. Elnias was not there to offer support. Will adjusted the strap on his shoulder, clinging to it for dear life, and entered through his doorway.

That Which is Not Human

Chapter Notes

> Bumped the rating up to mature because in this chapter the gore is described in some more depth.

Will stepped forward, and immediately felt a shift in the temperature. Where the hospital had been freezing cold, this place was warm. It reminded him of the warmth given off by the last few embers in a fire. Will wanted to call it welcoming, but he didn't dare to associate this place with good feelings. He couldn't afford to be stuck here forever or die.

Will walked through the hallway as fast as he could while still being cautious. He was afraid to make too much noise, in fear that it would awaken the creature lurking around a corner waiting for him. The entire place was ornate in a way that Will couldn't image. It was similar to the throne room of his dreams, only with colors that were muted. The brilliant golds were dimmed down to dusky oranges. The bright red that accentuated the entire throne room was muddled into burgundy so dark it appeared black.

Wide pillars lined the center of the hallway. Will took note of them, thinking that they could prove to be useful hiding spots if he needed them. Will glanced back at the door behind him. It was still wide open, and letting in the brisk hospital air.

Will's stomach growled as he traversed the hallway.

The curve in the hallway was so slight that Will did not realize the door was out of sight until he was no longer anywhere near it. How long did he take to reach this point? Three seconds? Three minutes?

Will shook his head. It was better not to think about it. He needed to keep moving.

And so he did.

Will walked until he reached a wide open room. There were jail cells lining the room. In some of them, skulls and pieces of skeletons. In others, nothing but piles of clothing. Will's stomach growled louder as he took in the smell of the room. The fresh wine, the steaming roasted chicken or turkey in the center and the sugar from the desserts.

Will reminded himself of Elnias's words. *Do not drink or eat anything*. Will ignored the grumbling of his stomach as best as he could as he walked along one side of the table. He couldn't help the wandering of his eyes. He took in everything that he could see, just imagining how delicious it would all be. There was no harm in imagination, right?

Halfway down the table, Will found himself unconsciously reaching for a plate piled high with drumsticks. The skin on the meat was perfectly golden brown. He wanted to sink his teeth into the tender thigh meat and let it wash over his tongue.

Will stopped himself before he could touch one of the gleaming white bones.

“You can’t eat anything,” he hissed. “You can’t eat anything, you can’t eat anything,” he repeated over and over. Will figured that maybe if he kept repeating it, he would eventually accept it as his reality. His words grew quieter as Will continued his trek beside the table.

A goblet of water sat in front of a wide, golden plate. Will wanted to snatch it from the table and down it all in one gulp. Was water against the rules? Will knew the answer.

Will forced his eyes away from the crystal clear water. He nearly jumped out of his skin when blackened eyes met his.

Will took a few, stumbling steps backward and away from those eyes. They were as dark as night and settled on a face with skin that was stretched and black. High cheekbones, pointed ears, and a long, slender nose. Will took in the face that was staring back at his without the slightest twitch.

The mouth moved. “Hello,” it said.

Will barely dared to breathe. His hands were fumbling, slowly, for the latch that kept the fairies and the key within Elnias’s container.

“I assumed that you spoke English,” the creature said. “Forgive me. I did not mean to be so rude.” The creature dipped its head, and Will noticed its enormous antlers. “I only came to this conclusion because you were speaking English to yourself a moment earlier.” Will could not tell if the creature had a lisp or an accent. “Tell me, friend, why can’t you eat anything here?”

Will opened his mouth to reply but shut it quickly. The book said that this creature was going to try and fool him. Don’t eat, don’t drink, don’t talk. Will opened the container for the fairies, and they flew out immediately. None of them had the courage to go near the black monster with long, bony arms. Will scanned the beast one more time before looping around and away from it. Now that he was away from the food, it was easier to remember his mission. He took the key from the container, and followed the fairies to the back end of the room, behind the monster. It did not turn to follow Will with its gaze, but Will could still feel those fathomless eyes tracking his every movement.

The fairies all gathered around a set of three doors, each with a keyhole in the middle. They were not sure which was the right one. Will tried the one in the middle, to no avail.

“Are you hungry?” the monster asked, still sitting at the head of the table.

Will’s stomach growled against his will. He cringed away from the noise; he stopped halfway before he could try unlocking another door.

“You *are* hungry,” the monster crooned. “Why don’t you sit down? I was looking forward to having a friend for this meal. Just look at this feast,” the creature said.

If Will were younger, he could easily imagine himself sitting down right next to death and eating a nice last supper with him.

Will resisted the urge to say ‘no, thank you.' No talking, Will reminded himself. Will tried another of the doors—the left one—and was more surprised than not when it opened up quickly for him. He opened the door and put his hand inside of it, and felt nothing. The fairies, like geckos, were sticking to the walls around the door. They squealed and chittered at Will. He had the right door; he just needed to go a little farther.

Will tried not to think about horror movies where reaching into something like this would end up with the character losing their arm. Will turned sideways and shoved himself against the door to press closer to it than he already was. Will pushed his arm deep into the cavern behind the door. He had to stand up on his toes, and press his face against the wall to get as far back as he could, and only then did his fingers brush against cloth.

Will stretched his fingers to the breaking point, trying desperately to wrap around any part of the fabric to pull it forward.

“Would you like some help with that?” the monster asked.

Will leaped back from the door, ready to run for his life if need be. The voice had been so much closer to his ear than before. Still, the monster sat in his chair. He had not turned his head, facing forward with an unblinking stare.

“My arms are longer than yours; I can easily reach it for you. You need but sit down and have dinner with me,” he offered. “I am very lonely for young company, and you are but a human with short arms that cannot reach what he needs. I help you; you help me.”

“Quid pro quo,” Will said dryly. “I can manage just fine on my own,” he snapped.

The fairies behind Will made scared, disappointed noises.

One rule was broken.

“If you are so sure, then I will leave you to it,” the monster said.

Will hesitated for a moment longer before believing the monster’s words. He went back to the open door and the fairies and stretched his arm as far as he could. Will was nearly sticking his head into the open doorway finally to wrap a finger around the edge of the cloth. Will pulled it forward slowly, he couldn’t risk whatever was held in the fabric falling out and putting him back to square one.

After what felt like hours, Will managed to free the material—and his prize—from behind the door. A velvet pouch, as red as blood, and very much like the bag that held the magic stones, fell into his hand. This pouch was much heavier, and Will nearly dropped it onto the floor. He

pulled open the drawstrings of the pouch. Inside of it was a gleaming dagger, with a golden hilt and a shining silver blade.

Will drew the blade out of the pouch and examined it carefully. The blade was polished to perfection; Will could see himself and the fairies warped in the reflection. The golden handle was weighty and Will let it rest in his palm. There were no stones decorating the handle, only very precarious carvings in the metal. Much of the carvings were letters, similar to those in Elnias's labyrinth.

The fairies squealed at Will, and he put the dagger away into its new vessel. Will tucked the key away with the knife and then turned back towards the entrance of the spacious room.

He did his best to ignore the monster.

"You look thirsty," it said.

Will continued to walk. His feet felt like lead, and every step away from the sumptuous banquet was becoming more and more difficult. At one point, Will felt the fairies tugging at his shirt collar.

One moment, Will was aware of his actions. The next, a dark screen covered his eyes and tinted everything around him with brighter colors. The images were so like his dream, making him think of the feast then and the delicious foods he ate.

As if watching himself on a movie screen, Will reached out to the table. The fairies flew in front of him and screamed, trying desperately to save Will's life. Will, separated from his body, stared as he plucked a slice of orange from a tray on the table. Each time a fairy tried to stop him, Will gently batted them away. He turned to look at the monster. It had not moved.

Will brought the orange slice to his mouth, and bit into it.

The fairies cringed and flew away from Will. They dared not to get closer to the monster that was now grinning wickedly. Will, enraptured by the flowery scent and the overwhelmingly sweet citrus flavor, noticed nothing around him.

The monster turned its head to one side, stretching its neck with a series of hideous pops. It did the same to the other side of its neck. The monster rolled its shoulders, cracked its knuckles, and stood.

Will, desperate enough to lick the orange juice from his fingers, grabbed a small slice of cake from a tray. He didn't stop to look at it or smell it, scarfing it down as quickly as he could. His stomach, upset by the sweetness, rolled in turmoil, but Will paid it no mind. He finished the cake and turned next to the plate of drumsticks he had been eyeing up earlier. Will grabbed one and sank his teeth into the tender flesh. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Will remembered the ticking of a clock. The clock did nothing to keep him from eating. Grease dripped from the corners of his lips and down his chin. The meat was sweet and delicious, more than anything Will could ever expect from a hospital dinner.

Will only stopped eating when he felt a hand on his shoulder. The monster was next to him, looming over him with that dark expression. Will could feel small waves of joy rolling off the monster, but nothing too intense.

“You should join me for dinner,” the monster said.

Will found himself nodding before he knew what he agreed to.

One fairy, the brave pink one, flew between Will and the monster. She tugged at Will’s hair and chittered furiously at him, but Will paid her no mind.

A knife of cold pierced through Will’s gut when a black hand came up and easily swatted the fairy. She fell like a fly and landed on the ground. Will stared unblinkingly at her unmoving body. After a horrible moment, her little chest shuddered with breath.

“Poor things,” the monster whispered. “Better to just put them out of their misery.”

The monster brought his foot up a fraction of an inch, hovering just above the fairy before he stepped down. She gave a horrified scream that became strangled and ended with a squish. Will watched as blood oozed out from under the monster’s foot. The other fairies screamed in protest, but they dared not get closer to the monster.

“We should eat dinner,” the monster invited.

Will, with a clawed hand resting on his shoulder, let the monster guide him back to the head of the table. He noticed a faint squelch as he stepped through the fairy’s blood, but felt nothing more. The other fairies, nervous but loyal, trailed behind Will and the monster.

Will sat down at the empty plate, and watched as the monster piled it up high with incredible food. Before it sat down again, Will was already eating. He was nauseous from the richness of it all, but he couldn’t stop himself. There was a tugging at his muscles, compelling him to keep eating. After finishing a particularly dry stack of crackers and cheese, Will grabbed a goblet full of wine and gulped it down. It had a tangy, metallic taste, but he brushed it off.

The entire time, the monster watched Will as he ate.

“Is it good?” the beast asked.

Will nodded.

The fairies, desperate for a second attempt at saving Will, fluttered around him. They kept wary eyes on the demon across from Will and made sure not to stray within reach of his deadly claws.

“Are they your friends?” the monster asked.

Will nodded through another mouthful of food. “Elnias gave them to me,” he choked out.

“Ah, Elnias,” the monster muttered. “I know him. An old faun with twisted beliefs about the royal family. He will never understand just how dangerous and cruel they can be.”

“He seems fine to me,” Will said. He finished off his goblet and set it down. He was tempted to eat more, but there was an insistent tugging at the back of his head. Talking about Elnias was triggering something in his brain, but he couldn’t quite figure out what. “He told me that I’m a prince,” Will explained.

“A prince? Prince Ruvyn perhaps?”

“Something like that,” Will agreed. Will reached for another slice of cake but pulled his hand back at the last second. He furrowed his eyebrows and looked up from his tray. In front of him, a rotting swine corpse was stretched out on the table. It vanished a second later and turned into a whole steaming, roasted pig. Will suddenly felt very sick. “I think I need to leave now,” Will said. He was impassive in his tone. He couldn’t give away any of his fear, lest the monster figure it out and eat him whole.

The blue fairy, a shier one, flew to Will’s shoulder. It stood up to whisper in his ear, but in a flash, it was gone. Will traced the movement as best as he could, watching the little fairy appear in the fist of the black monster. It brought the fairy close to his face and watched as the little thing squirmed.

“Pity, about Elnias,” the monster said. “How he uses these dumb creatures for more than they are capable of. He does not understand just how stupid they can be.” The monster brought the fairy closer to its face, watching as it screamed and struggled. The remaining two fairies flittered about nervously.

Just when Will thought the monster was going to crush the fairy, he reached up with his other hand and began to pet the fairy’s head and shoulders. It was gentle in its touches, and the fairy stopped struggling. Will could see the fear in the fairy’s eyes. Will wondered if his eyes were the same. Will glanced away from the scene, and took in his surroundings. The golds around Will turned to mottled, gnarly grays. The rich burgundy became a murky brown.

The food Will had just been eating was swarming with flies. Will could smell the death and rot wafting away from his plate and around the room. His stomach churned uncomfortably.

The blue fairy gave a piercing scream as the monster opened its mouth wide. It brought the fairy agonizingly slowly closer until the fairy was half inside of the gaping maw. The fairy pushed away from dagger-like teeth to no avail. The monster chomped down on the fairy, cutting the screams short. Like a wolf ripping meat off a carcass, the monster jerked its head to the side. The blue fairy’s spine split like a toothpick, and let forward a rush of blood and intestines.

Will scrambled to his feet as quickly as he could. His muscles were weighed down, and he could barely move the way he wanted to. His adrenaline was still arguing with itself, deciding if Will should hit the monster with the plate or run for his life towards the door.

The monster lapped up the stringy intestines, slurping them down like overcooked spaghetti. The other half of the fairy’s body was quick to be eaten, bones crunching like raw rice.

Will’s brain finally settled on a decision. With heavy legs, he tore off down the room and the hallway. The monster roared with laughter behind Will. The other two fairies kept up the best

that they could; Will was running as fast as he could manage.

Behind him, Will heard the chair scraping as the monster stood. Barefoot feet plodded along behind Will. They sounded much closer than Will liked. He chanced a look over his shoulder and spotted the monster. It was walking slowly, a cold air surrounding it. One brief moment later, Will was staring at the ground, and it was coming towards him with alarming speed.

Will's face cracked against the floor, but he didn't stop moving. Rather like a cartoon character, Will scrambled to gather his limbs and keep going. He could feel hot breath on his neck, and sharp claws scraping at the back of his shirt.

Will turned a corner that seemed far too intense to be the right one but saw the door leading into the hospital. A new rush of energy flowed through him, and he ran as fast as he could. The hallway seemed to stretch on forever as if Will was not making any ground at all.

The door creaked and groaned, and began to slide shut.

"No!" Will screamed. His feet stumbled and skittered on an uneven part of the path.

The door shut in front of Will just as his fingers brushed the wall. The hallway was thrust into total darkness.

Will stood frozen for a long time before he remembered that he was in danger. Behind him, he could hear the monster padding along. His plan worked out without a hitch; there was no need for him to rush. There was only so far that Will could go, and only so many places for him to hide.

Will ducked behind the first set of pillars, crumbling to pieces and barely providing enough shelter for him. He could see a faint outline of the monster as it prowled around. Each drag of its feet on the floor was purposeful, sending shivers up and down Will's spine.

"I can smell you," the monster murmured as if talking to a child that wouldn't take a nap. "I can smell the blood you drank, and the rotten food that you ate."

Will stared at the monster as it slinked closer to the door. It paused, running its hand over the outline that had just been there. It bent forward and sniffed hard at the door. Will took the moment to run across the room and behind another pillar.

The monster's head whipped around. Will patted his pockets, searching for the piece of chalk that would take him to another world. The monster drew closer and closer to his location. Will's heart was beating out of his chest. He couldn't think straight as he found the chalk, and traced his best outline of a door on the pillar.

The chalk snagged on a ridge of the pillar and snapped in two. Will heard the other piece clink-clink across the floor as it rolled. All too soon, it came to a stop. Will suddenly realized that the monster was much closer than he had first thought. Will needed another plan. He could hear the footsteps of the monster.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

With trembling hands, Will drew another outline on the floor, just big enough for his body to get through.

He screamed as a hand wrapped around his upper arm. Long, black claws dug into his flesh. The pain he felt was searing, and hotter than Hell. Will struggled and kicked his feet and screamed obscenities at the monster. It was cackling in a joyous way.

One of the fairies, Will couldn't be sure which color, flew to the monster's face. It scratched at its foe with sharp claws and bit him with pointed teeth. Will could see the faint outline of the fairy's body, becoming more illuminated as the door beneath Will began to glow and open. Will, stuck in place, watched as two hands shot up and wrapped around the fairy's body. One around the legs and one around the chest. The monster barely used any effort to rip the fairy in two, sounding all too pleased with what he had done.

The monster gulped down his second snack of the night and turned back to Will. He could see the glowing beneath his prey and knew that he had to act fast. The monster lurched forward and wrapped his fingers into Will's hair.

Like a candle being blown out, Will's body vanished as the door opened under him. The monster lurched forward but was not robust enough to hold Will. He glared down through the ragged-edged hole in his floor, observing Will as his body fell like a rock into moving, wet sludge.

Will's body cracked against the surface of the water, leaving him paralyzed and struggling for breath. The current was fast, dragging him downward and away from the danger above him. Will could feel little claws in his neck, the last fairy clinging onto him for dear life.

Will tumbled through the water for what seemed like forever. When Will finally surfaced and managed to gulp in a few breaths of air, his foot snagged on something below the water. Will was certain it was the monster. It must have jumped in after him and grabbed him from below. The force of the moving water pulled Will's body farther from his leg, and he knew something had to give.

Will heard a snap and screamed aloud in pain. His body tumbled through the water again, sucking in desperate lungfuls of sludge. Will's body was on fire, but he couldn't scream past the water in his lungs.

The water slowed its pace eventually, but Will was certain he was going to die. His vision was blurry, and he could only take in the shallowest of breaths. Will idly thought that maybe dying wouldn't be so bad. No more trials, no more monsters, just eternal darkness.

Will closed his eyes.

The Little Bird

Will woke much like he did in the hospital; sparingly and without much knowledge of where he was. He could remember the struggle with the monster and the fall. He remembered the pain in his foot, but he could not feel it now.

Will heard a shuffling all around him, and he struggled to open his eyes.

A massive creature was looming, but this one did not feel dangerous. Despite its similarities to the monster in the other realm, Will was not afraid of this monster.

“Ah!” the monster exclaimed. His ears swiveled happily at the sides of his head. The creature bent down and cradled Will in spindly arms. “My dear Prince Ruvyn.”

“Elnias,” Will whispered. The faun was pleased to know that Will still recognized him. “What are you doing here?” he asked. His voice was strained from lack of use.

“I am saving your life,” Elnias said. “Human bodies are fragile. I knew that the second trial would be a challenge for you, but I was not expecting this much trauma to your body,” Elnias tutted. He moved behind Will and gently helped his prince to sit up. Elnias had a small fire going in the fireplace, just enough to warm the air around them.

The second trial. Will’s brain flashed through the events, but there was a huge chunk missing from his memories. He couldn’t think of what happened to him. He remembered getting the knife and then falling through the floor. Will still had the container strapped to his hip. He felt a churning in his stomach and gut, but he didn’t know why.

“Where am I?” Will asked.

“I brought you to your home,” Elnias answered. “I found you in a horrible place underground. I do not know how you got there, but it was not the place for a prince,” he scorned. “I fear for your human life, Prince Ruvyn. You could have gotten an infection, or hit your head on something and never woken up. What would I do without you?” he asked. “What would you do without me?” Elnias rephrased.

“Die, probably,” Will groaned. Elnias had him on his couch, which Will supposed was good enough. His body was still on fire, but it wasn’t a horrible pain.

Elnias did not respond to Will’s answer, but he made a disapproving face. “I healed your ankle,” Elnias said. He did not want to linger on the death of his prince. “It was broken.” Elnias looked Will over. “Why was it broken?” he asked. His voice changed from caring, to something entirely different. It was a similar voice to the kind parents used when they were trying to coax the truth out of a child. Will could swear he felt the air temperature lower with the change in Elnias’s voice.

“When I was in the water,” Will said. “I think my foot got caught on something.”

Elnias nodded. He was quiet for a long time before speaking again. Will awkwardly shifted his weight from side to side; he passed the movement off as testing his newly-healed ankle.

“I emptied your lungs of dirty water. You were nearly gone when I found you, Prince Ruvyn. Humans are not fish; they cannot breathe water.”

“I wasn’t trying to breathe water,” Will argued.

“What were you trying to do?” Elnias pressed.

Will felt as if he was undergoing an interrogation. “I was trying to escape,” he said.

Will’s brain was starting to put together the puzzle pieces, and he did not like the images that he was seeing. The pink fairy, crushed under a heavy foot. The blue fairy, eaten alive like a worm. Will’s world spun around him, and he struggled to right himself out of the dizziness.

“I think something went wrong,” Will slowly admitted.

Elnias’s ears stood up at attention. He took a step back from Will to better see the face of his prince. Will would not allow it. He couldn’t look at Elnias if he tried. Guilt was chewing at him, eating him from the inside out. Will remembered the other fairy, torn in two by cruel hands.

“What do you mean, ‘you think’?” Elnias asked. His voice hardened, and it scared Will more than he would like to admit.

Will didn’t want to think of what an angry Elnias could manage to do. “I didn’t mean for it to happen,” Will whispered. “It was an accident.” He felt like a child who had pushed over a vase, but Will knew that he was in far more trouble than that. Three of Elnias’s friends were dead. What of the last fairy, did it die along the way? Will felt a stinging reminder of fairy claws in his neck.

“Prince Ruvyn, what have you done?” Elnias growled. His lip was curled back like that of a feral dog.

Will pulled the strap of the fairy-holder up over his head. He held it in his lap for a moment, staring down at the carved surface. He undid the latch and opened it.

Instead of a flood of little fairies, only one came flying out of the box. The yellow fairy flew immediately to Elnias’s shoulder. It stood up on its tip-toes and screeched nonsense into Elnias’s ear. Will continued to stare at his lap. Although he could not understand the fairy, Will could understand the hate that it was spewing. Will couldn’t blame it. He had killed three of the fairy’s friends.

There was a moment of silence, and then Will could sense every ounce of anger rushing out of Elnias’s body. It nearly toppled Will over; the sheer force of his emotions was far stronger than Will could have ever imagined.

“What have you done!” the faun yelled. Elnias’s voice bellowed like the roar of a lion. Each word left a sinking pit of fear and disgust in Will’s stomach. He hated himself. “You!” the

faun snarled. He pointed a gnarled finger at Will's face. "You have failed!" he accused. Elnias had yet to lower his voice.

"I got the knife," Will whispered. He was doing his best to placate the raging faun. The strength in Will's voice was gone. He sounded like a pin dropping compared to Elnias's hollering.

"You think I care about these things?" Elnias snapped. He turned a furious circle in Will's living room. If Will was not the prince, he was confident that Elnias would be throwing things at him in pure rage. "You have failed!" he repeated. "You do not understand the gravity of your actions, but you will now." Elnias threw down his hands repeatedly. Will knew the feeling; frustration so strong that he didn't know what to do with his body. "You cannot return!" he yelled.

The words cut like scalpels into Will's body. He finally looked up at Elnias. The stag was bristling like an angry cat. His ears were up and alert, and his eyes were pits of flame. He pawed the wood floor of Will's house like a stag about to charge.

"It was a mistake!" Will argued. He searched through the container and showed Elnias the knife.

The faun was at his side and snatching it away from Will before he could blink. Elnias's short tail swished side to side in a fury.

"You can never return," he continued. "This mistake is enough that you ended not only your life but the life of three friends!" he accused. "You will never return to your kingdom. You will never see your father and mother, for they will never want to see you again!" He snatched the container from Will as well, who had no room to protest. "You will stay in this world for the rest of your pathetic life!

"You will feel insurmountable pain; you will be betrayed. You will become sick and old, and you *will die*," Elnias hissed. Will wasn't sure if this quieter voice was more frightening than the louder voice. "You will die alone and without anyone to cradle you. No one will be there for you. Certainly, I will never return to your side," he snapped. "You are not Prince Ruvyn, and I was a fool to think that you were."

In a flourishing swirl, Elnias disappeared into the shadows. Will could hear the ringing of his shouting long after Elnias had vanished into nothing. Will knew the way to the labyrinth, but he could not bring himself to move.

Will longed for his dogs, but none were there. He could only hope that someone had taken them in, while he was in the hospital.

Without the company of his dogs, Will refused to move. He sat on the edge of his couch and watched as the hours ticked by. At some point, he got up and grabbed a bottle of whiskey from his kitchen. Will drank it slowly, letting the burn soothe him. He drank enough to get himself to sleep, and stayed like that for a long time.

Will had horrible nightmares of the monster eating his friends. He had worse nightmares of the monster picking his brain apart piece by piece and eating what he decided he didn't like. Typically, Will could wake himself up or would be scared awake by the nightmares. These nightmares were different. They were as thick as tar and refused to let him go. When he did wake up, the images stuck to him like glue and declined to let him go. Will was left with few other choices than to roll onto his other side and sink back into the clammy hands of sleep.

There was no escape from the nightmares, but at least he didn't suffer the same one every time. Occasionally, he dreamed of the gigantic toad under the tree. Other times, his nightmares swirled around Elnias goring him with his massive antlers. Will wasn't sure if he had ever been more ready to die in his life. The worst nightmares were ones about Abigail and her father. He saw images of not saving her, of watching the young girl bleed out before his eyes. He saw a small, fairy-like Abigail being ripped in half.

After that nightmare, Will stopped sleeping.

He wasn't sure how long it had been since the last time he saw Elnias, but the moon outside his window showed Will the passage of time. With each night that went by, the moon looked more and more full. Will waited patiently for the day the moon would begin to reverse its process. He wanted to see it grow thinner and thinner until there was nothing left in the sky except for inky darkness. He wanted to accept his failure.

On the night of the full moon, Will sat alone in his living room. His house was cold enough on the inside that he could see each of his breaths form before him and then dissipate. Some sick part of his brain—Will could have laughed, *all* of his brain was sick—wanted him to feel the pain of Prince Ruvyn. Perhaps if he stopped eating and drinking and taking care of himself, he would die the way Elnias's prince died. Perhaps then, Elnias would come and cradle his body like a child.

Will dropped his head, letting it hang between his shoulders. Elnias had no intentions of returning to him, and Will couldn't blame the faun. Will hated himself for letting the fairies die. It was his fault. He had thought one piece of an orange wouldn't count towards the no-eating-rule. He had been blind and foolish. Will knew how fairytales worked, but he had walked right into one of the most obvious traps in the world.

Will's house creaked and groaned with strain. Will could see shadows moving all around him. He was almost sure he was awake, but there was no way to know for certain when he was awake or not. For all he knew, he was dead and stuck in a never ending loop of self-loathing.

One shadow, in particular, stepped up to Will and reached for him. Will stretched his neck out, ready to have his throat sliced.

The shadow surprised Will, and put a soft hand on his greasy, dirty hair.

Will jumped up without a second thought and wrapped his arms around Elnias's waist. The faun gave a rumbling laugh deep in his belly.

“My dear prince,” he hummed. Elnias’s arms were wrapped around Will’s shoulders, pulling him in closer. “Did you think I was going to let you stay here and die all by yourself?”

Will nodded. Did this mean he was on the brink of death?

“I convinced your mother and father to give you a second chance,” Elnias said.

“Thank you,” Will breathed.

“It is your *last* chance,” Elnias continued. “Your *only* chance. Should you fail this time, you will stay here forever and die. Tonight is the night of the full moon, and we do not have much time, Prince Ruvyn. We have until midnight to right the wrongs that you have done.

“You must listen to everything I tell you to do. Do you understand me?” Elnias asked.

Will nodded. Elnias gave a soft smile and gently petted the back of Will’s head. There was a thatch of short hair, where the monster had ripped Will’s hair from his scalp.

“You do not need the book for this trial, all you must do is listen to me. I know that you can do that, my prince. You are an excellent prince, and you will do as I say.”

Will felt like a dog. He wanted nothing more than to please Elnias at that moment. “Just tell me what to do,” Will said.

When Will was hospitalized, Hannibal was the first one to turn down taking in Will’s dogs. He had the room in both his house and his yard for as many dogs as Will cared to own, but Hannibal would not allow it. Luckily, Alana—kind, sweet, stupid Alana—was there to take the dogs in. Hannibal did, however, take in the little bird that Will rescued. It was a small songbird, but with no courage left to sing.

Hannibal bought it a proper cage, a food and water dish, a bell, and a few other toys. Birds were not hard to care for, and this helpless life reminded him so much of Will that he wanted to keep it forever. Will was supposed to be in the hospital for a week after Hannibal found him out cold in the bathroom.

On his sixth day there, with the treatments working incredibly well, Will vanished.

Will’s shackles were picked open, and he left his hospital gown in a crumple on the floor. He had managed to unhook himself and get out of a fourth-floor hospital room without anybody noticing. Hannibal wasn't sure how Will had done it, but he was impressed.

Hannibal knew that now, all that was left was to be patient. Will would turn up when he felt like showing up. If it was in a few days, or a few months, or a few years, Hannibal could wait. He had the patience of a God; that was certain.

Another week passed in total silence. Everyone waited with baited breath for the return of William Graham. Jack was ready to start a manhunt, thinking that Will had been kidnapped and killed by the Chesapeake Ripper. This thought made Hannibal smile, and assure Jack that

no such thing had happened to Will. The Chesapeake Ripper still had no idea what he wanted to do with Will's body when he killed him. What parts would be the tastiest?

Hannibal carved through the flesh of a particularly plump thigh, peeling back the meat from the bone.

"What do you think, Little Bird?" Hannibal asked. The quiet creature sat in its cage, unmoving. Hannibal liked to take it wherever he went, from his kitchen to his bedroom to his office where he met with patients. A few patients found the bird comforting, but Hannibal allowed no one to touch the poor thing.

Hannibal knew that he could have bought the bird a partner. Songbirds needed friends, but Hannibal was friendly enough. He petted it, fed it, gave it water, but he got nothing back from it.

The bird ruffled its feathers and then settled once more. Hannibal was glad to see that it didn't try desperately to break out of its gilded cage. He needn't clip the feathers to keep the bird tame. Hannibal allowed himself a faint smile at the bird and continued preparing his dinner. He planned on having Jack and Alana for dinner—in the least literal sense possible.

Hannibal put on a show for his Little Bird. He didn't have another name for it, figuring that Will should be the one to name it. Hannibal had half a mind to call the bird Will, but he decided against it. Perhaps he should give it a name like one of Will's dogs. Lucky or Poppy.

"I could eat you, I think I should tell you that," Hannibal said. He had a bad habit of talking to Little Bird when no one else was around. "There is a dish that I have in mind for such a time." Hannibal sprinkled a heavy layer of salt onto the thigh meat and massaged it in. "It requires drowning you while you are alive. If you don't sing for me, maybe that is my best option for you."

Little Bird ruffled its feathers again. It wasn't cold, only trying to comfort itself.

"Roast you after you die, and then eat you whole. It's a tragic dish, but one that I would enjoy partaking in," Hannibal mused. He moved onto the next few spices in his dish. He wasn't planning anything in particular at that very moment; that could wait until after Hannibal prepared the meat. "But then again, our dear William might be upset if I ate you." Hannibal paused and glanced at the bird. Its eyes were barely open, lulled into a state of calm by Hannibal's voice. "Do you remember William?" he asked. "I never asked him how he found you, but you are the outlier in his pack. Perhaps you would be better off being called Black Sheep than Little Bird."

Hannibal hummed a soft tune as he worked, eventually transitioning to whistling. He was constantly trying to get the bird to sing. What other use could a songbird have than to please its master?

Hannibal had smelled him before he saw him. He smelled like strong alcohol and terror. There was a hint of courage, a soft undertone compared to the dirt caked on his skin. Hannibal picked up his butcher's knife and began to slice the thigh meat into thick portions. A roast seemed fitting for this particular cut of meat.

“William Graham,” Hannibal greeted. “Would you like to sous chef?” he asked. Hannibal did not look up from his work. He glanced at Little Bird, who gave no recognition of the man standing in the doorway to Hannibal’s kitchen.

Will appeared unarmed, and uninjured. Hannibal couldn’t smell his disease or anything reminiscent of the hospital lingering on his body.

Will did not say anything. Hannibal watched through thick lashes, under the guise of still working, as Will trailed along the outside edge of the kitchen. He had something grasped tightly in his hand. A knife, perhaps?

Hannibal set down his knife and wiped his hands on his apron. He finally looked up at Will. The man was a mess. He was bedraggled and frumpy, in new clothes, but very obviously not showered in a few days. Hannibal saw a danger in Will’s eyes, something that was very unusual for him. Hannibal turned his body to match Will, following his every move.

“Don’t you know that it is rude to lurk?” Hannibal chastised.

“I don’t care about rude,” Will coldly said.

His voice was not what Hannibal expected. Then again, the unexpected was to be expected of William Graham.

“Why are you here, Will?” Hannibal asked. There was the elephant in the room, and Hannibal faced it head-on.

“I want you to come with me,” Will said. He left no room for argument.

Will reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a gun. Out of his other hand fell a piece of black chalk as Will tried to stabilize the gun. His arms trembled badly as Will lifted the gun, level with Hannibal’s eyes. Will’s eyes were glassy, and darkly ringed with purple and red. Hannibal couldn’t imagine the last time Will slept. Will could barely keep eye contact even if he tried, and his arms were jerking. Tell-tale signs of an impending seizure.

“Perhaps you should put down the gun, William,” Hannibal said.

“Get your keys,” Will snarled. His words sounded slurred; maybe he was still drunk. The gun jerked away from Hannibal for half a second, followed by the ringing of a bullet firing.

Hannibal didn’t need to look. The shot whizzed past him and into the wall of his kitchen behind him. Perhaps through to the other side of the dining room wall.

Hannibal, intensely curious, untied his apron from around his waist. He let Will follow him, the muzzle of the gun between his shoulder blades. If anything, Hannibal was pleased that Will was staying so close to him. He liked the idea that he was helping to ground Will in this reality. Hannibal grabbed his keys and coat, going so far as to offer another layer to Will, who refused.

Hannibal led Will to his car and slid inside. He waited for Will, who hit his head on the outside of the car door. Nothing traumatic, but enough to leave him dazed for a very long

time. In Hannibal's rearview mirror, he could see Jack, standing outside of his car and looking appalled. Hannibal backed out of his driveway and started driving. Behind him, Jack got into his vehicle and began to follow Hannibal and Will.

Alone in the kitchen, Little Bird began to tweet and hum out soft tunes.

Elnias and the Full Moon

Chapter Notes

I apologize that I didn't upload this at the buttcrack of dawn like I usually do.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will could barely see straight through half of the drive to his home. He refused to speak to Hannibal, let alone look at him. His wrists seared at the thought of what Elnias had told him; the idea of what Hannibal had done to him was coiling in his stomach.

Will's head lolled from side to side as Hannibal drove on. Will didn't tell him where to go—or at least he could not remember if he had—but he was going in the right direction. The hour-long drive went by without a hitch. Will passed out on occasion, but never for very long. When he continually woke to see that Hannibal was still heading towards Wolf Trap, he was content enough to let himself relax when he needed to.

After what seemed to be years or maybe seconds, Hannibal pulled into the driveway and up to Will's house. Will stumbled out of the car, his gun raised once more. He kept the barrel as level as he could with Hannibal's face. Should he put one toe out of line, Will planned on demolishing his brains.

"May I ask where we are going?" Hannibal inquired. He moved around the car slowly, and Will kept a sharp eye on every step that he took.

Will jerked his gun towards the forest, indicating where Hannibal should start walking. "I'll tell you where to go," Will growled.

Hannibal nodded and walked in the direction that Will pointed. Will plodded along behind Hannibal, doing his best to keep his footing as stable as possible. Will tripped now and then over a root or a rock that he didn't see, but it wasn't enough to stop him.

The entire time, Will kept his finger wrapped around the trigger. There was a little part of his brain, screaming at him to move his finger. He knew that he was only meant to put his finger on the trigger if he was going to shoot. He wasn't planning on killing Hannibal unless he acted out.

"Why have you come to this conclusion, William?" Hannibal asked. He walked leisurely, and it annoyed Will. Hannibal had no right to be so calm. "Are you going to shoot me out here?" Hannibal paused; Will refused to speak. "I assume you do not mean to kill me," he decided. "Forgive me, but I cannot help my curiosity in a situation like this, dear Will."

"Then keep it to yourself," Will muttered.

“Do you want me to die?” Hannibal asked. There was a tilt to his head as he spoke.

The image of Hannibal melted away and the monster from Will’s second trial took Hannibal’s place. It took all the restraint that Will had to keep from pulling the trigger. He watched, disgusted, as the monster’s eyes slid around his head until they were on the back of his skull. Those dark eyes watched Will intensely. They never let him out of their sight.

“You’re no good to me dead,” Will said.

“I am relieved,” Hannibal replied. Will did not hear an ounce of relief in his voice.

“Keep walking,” Will barked. “I don’t want to hear your voice again.”

Hannibal gave another little nod. If Will weren’t ready to fall over dead, he might take a moment to consider how odd it was for Hannibal to be letting him off the hook so easily. Hannibal didn’t prod for a deeper answer; he barely objected to Will’s demands. Those swimming black eyes curled around to the front of Hannibal’s head once more. As they walked through the forest, bits of fur began to sprout along Hannibal’s joints. Will shook his head. For a second, his mind was not hazy and he saw the man he knew, walking in front of him as if on a leisurely stroll.

Unable to realize how strange it all was, Will accepted it. Perhaps Hannibal had always been a shapeshifter, but he had not known it. Will would ask Elnias about shapeshifters when he got the chance. He pushed Hannibal through the forest until the trees were squeezing in around them. Out of the corners of his eyes, Will could see a fairy darting back and forth between the branches. Will was determined to keep his eyes forward; he did not want to risk losing Hannibal because of his slip in precautions.

Will was pleased to watch Hannibal squirm through the trees. Will could tell that he was trying not to ruin his suit, but that he also wasn’t too concerned about any damage that fell upon it. He had more than enough money to replace anything that was ruined by their escapade.

At the entrance of the labyrinth, Hannibal paused.

Will roughly shoved the muzzle of the gun against Hannibal’s lower back.

“I didn’t say stop,” Will grumbled.

“I believe that while you are like this, Will, we should not enter a place such as this,” Hannibal warned. Before he knew what was happening, Will was looking right into Hannibal’s eyes. Hannibal’s palm was pressed against the mouth of the gun, steadying Will’s shaking arm. “There is a danger that you will become lost or hurt, and I do not have any form of emergency contact on me. We are in the middle of a forest, Will. I urge you to think twice before we take one step more.”

“Nothing is going to happen,” Will said. He wanted desperately to look away from Hannibal, but he felt drawn to those dark eyes. Hannibal’s eyes reminded him of Elnias’s. Calm and all-knowing. As if the image was beckoned forward by Will’s imagination, Hannibal’s eyes grew

larger, and black fur sprouted along his skin. With his unoccupied hand, Will reached out and gently touched the fur, finding it just as soft as Elnias's. The faun turned to nuzzle against Will's curious touch.

Will felt something in his gut, pushing him forward like a great wind, and he stumbled closer to Hannibal. In one smooth motion, Hannibal's hand wrapped around the muzzle of Will's gun and moved it off towards something safer. The wind whipped past them and down the halls of the labyrinth, screaming and howling as it traversed the confusing turns.

"If you turn back now, Will, I can get you out of this," Hannibal softly said. "Either to a hospital or my home, the choice is yours."

Prince Ruvyn, hurry! We must go immediately!

Will nearly toppled over himself as he skittered away from Hannibal. His face changed back to that of a human in the blink of an eye. The wind carried Elnias's voice, and straight to Will's ears. Will raised the gun with trembling hands and motioned towards the labyrinth. His eyes were crossing, Will wasn't sure he could shoot Hannibal if his life depended on it.

"No," he said, as firmly as he could. Will could hear the slurring in his voice. "Turn around, keep walking."

Hannibal did just that.

They had only just turned the first corner of the labyrinth when they both heard a familiar shouting. Hannibal continued to walk, while Will paused to listen to the words.

"William Graham!" the distant man hollered. "Hannibal Lecter!"

The voice left a sinking pit in Will's stomach. He gave a little sprint to catch up to Hannibal. Will put a hand on his shoulder and pushed him forward.

"Turn right and then take the third left," Will instructed.

Hannibal, all too pleased with how this was turning out, followed Will's directions. The shouting behind them was growing closer and was now joined by a second familiar voice.

"Will!" the woman yelled, somewhere far off in the labyrinth. "Hannibal!"

Will thanked his lucky stars. It sounded as if they took a wrong turn the moment they entered the labyrinth. There was no way that these people would catch him and Hannibal.

"Through this corridor, and to the left, under the arch," Will said.

He followed Hannibal through the stone pathways until they were at a seeming impasse. Hannibal waited in the center of the short corridor. He tracked Will's every move. Will shoved past Hannibal and approached the thick swath of vines that shielded the entrance to the center of the maze from outsiders. Will pounded his fist on the wall next to the vines.

"Elnias!" Will called. "Hurry, let us in!" he begged.

Will missed the brief look of recognition that passed over Hannibal's features.

Just as Will was about to turn around and run down the next path that would take them to the center of the Labyrinth, the vines parted. Will pushed them aside the rest of the way, and waited for Hannibal to brush past the overgrown vegetation first. Will followed, and listened as the vines closed behind them.

Elnias waited for them to the left of the giant carved stone that sat in front of the well.

"Hurry, my prince!" Elnias called.

Will ran over to Elnias, feeling like a drunk man chasing after a taxi. He wrapped his arms around Elnias's middle, and let Elnias's strong arms support him.

"I brought him," Will said.

Elnias's hand pet through Will's unruly, dirty hair. "You have done well, my prince. There is but one thing left for you to do." Elnias reached into his infinite pouch and procured a heavy velvet sack. He handed it to Will, who took it without question.

"To return to your kingdom, and to become immortal, you must end the life of a monster," Elnias said. He used his other hand to close Will's fingers around the scarlet velvet. "There are many monsters in this world, and ridding it of one will be your last gift to these people."

Will, clutching the velvet pouch to his chest, turned to look at Hannibal over his shoulder. The man was no longer there. For a second, Will thought he had lost him. Will turned back to Elnias, but the faun bore Hannibal's face. The disturbing image forced Will to take a step back, but it was gone in a cloud of smoke. Hannibal reappeared at Will's side.

"You know who he is, Your Highness," Elnias assured. "And you know what you must do to him."

Will had no doubts about what it was that he had to do. He loosened the drawstrings of the pouch and pulled the gleaming dagger from inside of it. Will examined the glinting metal and tested the weight of it in his hand. Delicately, Will ran his thumb along the edge of the dagger. His skin split and blood surfaced. Will's stomach was doing summersaults, and his lungs were full of butterflies.

"You must hurry, Prince Ruvyn," Elnias said. He prowled around the outside of the well and circled until he was behind Hannibal. The stag paced nervously, and each feather on his spine shuddered as he twitched and fussed. "There are other humans, and they are looking for you. I distracted them for as long as I could, but they will find you. They will become hindrances to our plan if you do not act fast. You have many paths that you can take, but this is the most obvious, my prince."

Will turned around, holding the dagger by the hilt. It felt perfect in his grip as if the smith made it with Will in mind. Will took staggering steps towards Hannibal, but Elnias bristled.

“Not here!” he snapped. Elnias swung his hands furiously. “We must collect his blood.” Elnias gestured to the well.

Will did the same with his knife. Hannibal walked forward and stood at the edge of the well. His toes hung precariously over the lip of the stones. Despite the depth, Hannibal did not look unbalanced as he peered down the well. Will shifted the dagger in his hand and approached Hannibal. He could hear Elnias bleating with joy behind him. Hannibal’s grin was growing wider by the second. Somewhere in the maze, he heard the woman’s voice grow more desperate as she screamed their names.

“Are you going to kill me, Will?” Hannibal asked. “I don’t believe that is what we discussed a few moments ago. Were you not intending to kill—“

“Shut up!” Will snapped, interrupting Hannibal. He nearly dropped the knife with the sudden rush of emotions taking over his body.

Hannibal gave Will a long sidelong glance, but it went unnoticed. Will stepped up to Hannibal. He was overwhelmed with the power that surged through his body, seeing Hannibal standing in the mud. His life was in the palm of Will’s hand.

“I need to kill you,” Will said.

“And why is that?”

“I just need to,” Will repeated.

“What is different about this place, that you can kill me here? Before, you said that I was better to you alive than dead,” Hannibal continued.

Rage itched just under the surface of Will’s skin.

“You don’t get it!” Will snapped. Hannibal did not flinch. “You wouldn’t get it; I can’t explain it to you. You would think I’m crazy.” Will’s fingers were wrapped so tight around the dagger that his knuckles were turning white.

“I do not think that you are crazy, William,” Hannibal said. His tone was as placating as could be. “If I ever made you feel that way, William, I apologize,” Hannibal murmured. He turned his head and allowed his throat to press at the tip of Will’s dagger. He could see the gun lying just a few inches away from where Will dropped it. “I would never associate a mind as beautiful as yours with a word so disgusting as ‘crazy.'”

Will felt all of the power spill out of him at once. Hannibal’s skin was bowing just so under the point of the silver dagger. Will took it away from Hannibal’s neck; his courage was replaced by a strange sort of fear.

“He promised,” Will muttered.

“Who promised you what, William?” Hannibal asked. He turned to properly face Will.

Will looked up to see the furry visage of Elnias once more. He had his feathers now, but his face was only just recognizable.

"*You* promised," Will corrected. With trembling fingers, Will brought the knife to the tip of Elnias's nose. He did not move away; Elnias blinked calmly at the sight in front of him. "You promised me immortality. If I kill a monster, I get to live forever."

"Is that what you want, Will? Immortality?"

Will nearly fell over from the shock of hearing Elnias use his human name.

"Kill him, my prince!" another Elnias yelled. This one, off to the side of the half-formed Elnias, stamped his feet and raced to the other side of the well. "You must kill him now! Midnight draws closer with each breath that you waste, talking to this man!" Spit was flying from his lips as he raised his voice.

"Shut up!" Will screamed.

Elnias reared back.

Hannibal smirked.

"You can't tell me what to do!" he snapped. "This has been my choice all along, and you're not going to ruin it now!"

Like a dog that had been kicked, Elnias backed away from Will. He was carefully treading backward to Prince Ruvyn's unofficial grave.

"If you cannot do this, then you will die," Elnias threatened. "There are humans here who wish to kill you. If you cannot complete your task—I will let you die."

"Get out!" Will yelled.

Elnias shriveled away into the shadows. Will loosened his grip on the hilt of the dagger, and let it fall from his fingers. It clattered the whole way down the well, and Will could feel every inch of it ringing in his bones.

Will collapsed onto the ground in front of Hannibal. His chest was heaving, and he felt like he was going to fall into the well at any moment. Will gave himself the time to appreciate the silence that Hannibal was giving him.

The shouting of their names was growing louder with each passing second. Will knew that the shouting should concern him, but he couldn't find it in himself to do more than accept his fate. What could he say to the people looking for them? Will looked up at where Elnias disappeared, but the faun was gone.

Will shirked away his last chance at immortality. All because he didn't have it in him to kill Hannibal. Will thought of the place in his dreams. He thought of the magical land with food and love and warmth. He wanted to go to that place again. Will wanted to see the fairies and Elnias. He wanted a lot of things.

“Who wanted you to kill me?” Hannibal asked, finally breaking the silence that hung heavy between them. “Was it Hobbs?” he asked, venturing a guess. Hannibal extended his hand, his fingers within sight of Will’s peripherals.

Will was ready to shake his head, but across the way, he could see the familiar shadowy figure step forward. Will hadn’t dealt with him in a long time, not since Elnias had started to appear, and he wasn’t sure that he was ready to deal with him now. Will hated the way that he looked; he hated the way Hobbs’s eyes glinted from this far away. Will reached out, and blearily took Hannibal’s hand. With no effort at all, Hannibal hauled Will to his feet. Will stumbled, but Hannibal steadied him away from the precipice.

“No,” Will said.

“May I ask who, then?”

“A stag,” Will said. “A faun,” he corrected. “He’s similar to a stag that I’ve seen before, but I’m never exactly sure who he is,” he continued. “This time he became a faun. He promised me immortality for killing a monster.” A simplified version of what happened, but it would have to do. Will glanced at Hannibal. The black monster with antlers was standing there with him in the dirt, two strong hands on Will’s shoulders.

“Many people fear death,” Hannibal said. “It is something that is in our natures. No one can tell us what will happen, and not knowing is the birthplace of all fear.”

“I’m not afraid of dying,” Will said.

“What are you scared of?”

“Monsters,” Will smoothly replied. “And you.”

Hannibal’s eyes gave Will a once-over. “This is not the first time that you have referred to me as a monster, William. Why are you so certain that I intend to harm you?”

Will gave a weak flail of his arm, emphasizing his bandaged wrist. “You did this to me.”

The tail end of Hannibal’s eyebrow quirked. Other than that, he stayed stoic. “You came to this conclusion because of what?”

“Because I saw it,” Will said. “I was you, and I did this to myself. That day in the bathroom, when I was covered with mud. I caught pneumonia somehow. I looked psychotic; I had been missing from work for two days.” Will scoffed; it was a hard, scornful laugh at himself. “It was like lying on a platter and begging you to eat my guts.”

“How did it feel, Will? When you saw the actions through my eyes?”

Will worked his jaw back and forth. “Good,” he said. It was as simple as telling someone how he was doing. “I felt powerful. I felt alive.”

“You were killing yourself, how did it make you feel alive? Surely most people would be horrified at watching their life slip away, before their very eyes,” Hannibal mused.

“I’m not most people,” Will quipped. “I already told you that death doesn’t scare me. I’ve become desensitized to death. It’s hard to see the victim anymore.”

“Who is easier to see?” Hannibal asked.

“The monster,” Will said.

Hannibal adjusted himself, moving to sit in a more dignified way. His legs moved slowly, bones creaking like Elnias’s. “Perhaps,” he began, looking up at the full moon. Will glanced at Hannibal’s watch, just barely visible beneath the hem of his shirt sleeve. “Perhaps you are afraid of monsters because you are becoming one. In some way, most of us fear ourselves. Are you afraid of yourself, dear William?”

Three minutes to midnight.

Three minutes to change his fate.

“I’m not afraid of myself,” Will said. To his right, the gun sat just out of his reach. If he dove for it, he could grab it before Hannibal could. “I’m scared of what I might do if left unchecked.”

Hannibal gazed at the heavy moon above them, and then into Will’s cloudy eyes. “You do not need to wander this earth on your own, William.” Hannibal’s voice was like freshly brewed tea, searing and peaceful at the same time. “There is no need for any of us to stay alone. Often, I find myself longing for a companion; someone like myself.” Hannibal’s hands, cloaked in stretched black skin, cradled Will’s strong jaw. Long claws brushed along the edges of Will’s cheekbones, the points barely missing his eyes. “You felt powerful, William. There is no shame in wanting to feel power. I have told you before, I can give you the power that you seek.”

Will’s eyes flickered to look at Hannibal’s for a brief moment.

“I can give you immortality, Will. All you must do is say that you want it.”

“I want to be immortal,” Will whispered. Hannibal was so close to him. Will was not sure if he was looking into Hannibal’s eyes or Elnias’s or the monster’s.

Hannibal’s lips parted to reveal his teeth, glinting in the light. “That’s all I need to know,” he murmured.

He dipped down to match Will’s height, and the mere inches of space between them were sealed. Hannibal’s lips were pressed against Will’s, moving and insistent. Will had gone as white as a sheet and as still as the stones that surrounded them. Hannibal was kissing him, tongue lapping against his lips. Will couldn’t help but think about how horrible his mouth must have tasted, but he couldn’t bring himself to push Hannibal away.

Hannibal’s arms were firmly wrapped around Will, he could feel one hand at the base of his skull and the other at the small of his back. Will’s own hands—he wasn’t sure when—had flown to Hannibal’s shoulders, gripping his skin so tightly through the layers of clothing he

wore that bruises were certain to form.
Before Will could think any more about what was happening, or about what he was going to do, he allowed himself to submit. In Hannibal's last few moments of life, he would give him what he wanted.

Will had barely parted his lips before Hannibal's tongue dipped into his mouth, wet and as hot as fire. Hannibal's tongue was searching in Will's mouth, seeking out each and every crevice. He prodded against Will's teeth, lapped at his gums, touching anything and everything that he could, unable to get enough of the taste.

As if to make things worse, when Will dared to flick his tongue against Hannibal's, Hannibal moaned into his mouth. It was a guttural noise, starting from his stomach and pouring outward and into Will. Will wasn't sure if it was even so much of a sound as it had been a feeling, a deep vibration passing from Hannibal to him. Either way, it made his muscles turn into warm pudding, and his knees nearly buckle under his weight.

Hannibal was there to catch him, both of his hands going to Will's cheeks, holding him firmly in place. Will's vision was starting to swim with black dots, his lungs begging for air, but Hannibal was relentless. When Hannibal removed his tongue from Will's mouth, he sucked Will's lower lip between his teeth, digging into the soft, delicate skin with his pointed canines. Will let out a soft sigh, and the grin that he felt spread across Ryan's lips was better than anything.

Just when his vision was left with only two narrow lines of sight, focused on the way that Hannibal's brow moved as he kissed Will, Hannibal pulled back. Will sucked in deep gasps of air, so winded from it all that he stumbled backwards, and nearly fell backwards into the well. Hannibal grasped Will's arms as tight as a vice, and Will stared up at Hannibal as his vision cleared, and his body pulsed heavily with the sudden rush of oxygen that had come flooding back.

The moment hung heavy between them. Hannibal's lips, glistening with faint traces of spit and a possible speck of blood. Will's lips, nearly red and soothed only by the chill air around them.

The moment passed by in an instant, and then time slowed down. Will twisted his body like a cat away from Hannibal and lunged for the gun. It took Hannibal barely a second to react before his body was following Will's. His arms were longer, but Will had the advantage of speed and making the first move.

Will's fingers clasped around the handle of the gun the second after his chin collided hard with the uneven dirt. The taste of blood washed into Will's mouth, and his lip was suddenly much sorer than before. The metal, sitting on the ground for so long, was like ice in Will's grip. Will threw himself onto his back, but Hannibal was there already.

The hands of the clock sped up, and the back of Will's head cracked against the ground. Hannibal had a grip like iron around Will's wrist and used his leverage above Will to twist his shoulder around. Will groaned in pain, but he wasn't ready to give up just yet.

Will, with one well-aimed kick, landed his boot in the center of Hannibal's gut. Hannibal stumbled backward and away from Will. Jumping to his feet, Will took a wild swing and relished the sound of metal snapping against bone. He had only a second to watch Hannibal spit up a mouthful of blood, with more where that came from before Hannibal was returning the favor.

Hannibal's hands were around Will's throat before he could think, crushing the air out of his windpipe. Will had no doubt that Hannibal meant only to subdue him, and not to kill him. Still, Will, with arms that were steadily going numb, lifted the gun upwards. He wrapped his finger around the trigger and pulled it. The noise of the gunfire had Will reeling, but Hannibal appeared unharmed, but certainly momentarily startled. Will's first shot whiffed, but now he had a second chance. Will didn't have many second chances left.

He brought the gun level with Hannibal's head. Completely unaffected, Hannibal walked forward until the mouth of the weapon pressed against his forehead. They were teetering dangerously on the lip of the well. One false step could send both tumbling.

"I know what you are," Will snarled.

Hannibal practically grinned. His teeth were bloody, and his lower lip appeared swollen. There was a gory split right down the middle, dribbling blood steadily. "Oh?" he asked, panting heavily. "What am I, William?"

"You're the Chesapeake Ripper."

"Clever boy," Hannibal sneered.

"I know what you did to me," Will growled. "I know why I was in that hospital; it wasn't just because of a bad case of pneumonia." Will took a second longer to gather his thoughts.

"You lied to me!" he all but screamed. "You said--you said so many things!" Will accused. "I trusted you, and you took advantage of me."

"I may have lied, Will, but it was only because I was concerned for you," Hannibal said. The whole time that he spoke, he had a gruesome, bloody grin smeared on his face. "I can still give you what you are looking for—I was not lying about that. You need only lower the gun, and I can give you your immortality that I promised."

"Will Graham!" The man from before was much closer now than he had ever been.

Will had a second to take in his features and the features of the woman behind him. Jack had a gun, up and poised to kill. Alana stood behind him, horrified at the sight in front of her. When Will's second was up, Jack's finger squeezed the trigger of his gun. Will heard the shot long before he felt it. He watched as his world turned from Hannibal into the full moon, high above him in the sky.

Chapter End Notes

There was a little bit of gay in there.

The Lullaby of the Labyrinth

Chapter Notes

Woah it's the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal heard Jack’s voice a split second before Will realized what was happening. Will gave him the ideal opportunity to watch his face light up with recognition. The next thing Hannibal knew; blood was spraying everywhere. Blood coated Hannibal’s entire face and chest in seconds. A moment after that and Will’s body collapsed. Hannibal didn’t have enough time to grab him, before Will’s body slumped down the well.

Hannibal rushed to the set of spiraling stairs that lead down into the well. Will’s blood was dripping off his face in a steady stream. Hannibal patted the side of his neck, just in case the bullet grazed him, but none of the blood was his own. Hannibal’s feet never failed him, guiding him down and into the center of the well.

At the bottom of the well, awkwardly laid out, Will was in a pool of his blood. Hannibal jumped the last few steps to get to him quicker. Will’s face was paler than normal, and turning a grotesque shade of blue where his blood didn't cake onto his skin.

Hannibal ripped off his tie and wrapped it around Will’s neck. The thin material did little to staunch the bleeding. Hannibal’s hands were covered with maroon in seconds as if a second skin was growing and clinging to him.

For once, Will’s whole body was still. He didn’t have anything to fidget with, nor glasses to push up, nor loose strings to tug at. Awkward angles splayed his limbs this way and that, and the side of his face was ripped up from the fall. Hannibal inched forward, kneeling in Will’s blood. Carefully, Hannibal cradled Will’s head. His fingers wormed slowly to the back of his head and found a familiar feeling that was not Will’s hair nor his scalp.

Hannibal glanced up the well, Jack was at the top of the stairs and slowly descending. Hannibal wanted to slam his face repeatedly into the nearest wall, but Alana was at the surface, desperately trying to call emergency services. Rage coiled and burned hot in Hannibal’s gut.

Will’s fingers twitched, bringing Hannibal’s attention back to where it belonged. Hannibal looked down at Will. His lips were nearly white, as was the rest of his face.

“I’m here, William,” Hannibal whispered. All he could offer at this point was his comfort. Will had surpassed all his expectations in just a few moments, and now he was withering away.

“I don’t feel anything,” Will croaked. Blood began to seep at the corners of his mouth. “I’m not in pain.”

Hannibal hunched over Will protectively. Around them, he could see Will’s blood soaking into what appeared to be little drainage pipes along the floor. The carvings were intricate when filled out.

“That is not necessarily a good thing,” Hannibal replied. He petted his hand through Will’s hair. He was as gentle as he would be with Little Bird. Despite Will claiming not to feel anything, Hannibal didn’t want to aggravate any of his injuries.

“It’s not so bad,” Will replied. He attempted a smile. Hannibal watched the sad attempt cross his features, and then disappear just as quickly. Will’s eyes were unfocused and darted back and forth as they met Hannibal’s eyes. “Should I be scared?” he asked.

“You said it yourself, William; you do not fear death.”

Will gave a tiny nod. Hannibal watched as glistening tears began to form at the edges of his eyes. They were not as stark as the blood in his mouth but stood out all the same. Hannibal gently brushed them away from Will’s cheeks.

“Am I dying?” Will asked.

“Of that I am almost certain,” Hannibal said. He pressed Will’s hair out of his face. Hannibal could feel the dirt and grease and blood on each strand, but he didn’t pull his hand away.

Will’s eyes slipped away from Hannibal’s. He was silent for so long that, if Hannibal didn’t have a hand on Will’s back, feeling each tortured breath in and out, he would have thought the young man dead. The blood, once flowing out of him like a river, was now gently pooling out and around him. Eventually, Will’s mouth moved, but he didn’t make a sound. Hannibal lowered himself, pressing his forehead to Will’s.

“Again, William,” he whispered.

Will took a shuddering breath in. “Are you scared?” he repeated. His voice was all but gone at that point.

Hannibal closed his eyes. He could smell Will’s blood, soaking everything it touched. He could smell the fear on Will and felt sorry for him. Hannibal gently carded his long fingers through Will’s hair. He was holding onto life by a few fractions of seconds. Emergency transport would be far too late to do anything for him. Under Hannibal’s hand, Will’s breath grew shallower and shallower as the seconds ticked on.

“I am not scared, William.”

Will seemed to give a little nod, as if that was the answer he was expecting. “Are you sad?” he asked next.

“I am angry,” Hannibal said. He paused, weighing the emotions that were heavy in his throat and chest. “And a little sad.”

The silence stretched on. Will was hardly breathing, and no more blood was trickling out of his body. Around them, Will's blood covered nearly the entire floor. It sank into the carvings in the ground, detailing each one of them. The moonlight, somehow clear this far underground, illuminated each droplet. Hannibal knew blood appeared black in the moonlight, but it was not the case with William's blood. There were a thousand different hues of scarlet in his life essence, as it dried and filled in cracks in the carved stone.

"Do you know a lullaby?"

Hannibal wasn't sure if he heard the words or not, before he realized that it was Will's voice. Hannibal straightened his back, petting Will's hair continually. Despite Will's reluctance to touch, human comfort was what he needed at that moment. Hannibal glanced up at Jack from under his frayed hair, watching as he descended the last few steps. Jack approached, and then backed away immediately. He settled himself across the way, his face held in his hands and his head hung low.

"Only one," Hannibal agreed. "From when I was a child. It was my sister's favorite. Would you like to hear it, William?"

Will's chin moved in the tiniest of nods.

Hannibal began to hum softly. He refused to let his notes falter, or his voice to break. Will deserved only the best performance from him. As Hannibal hummed the gentle tune, he watched the life slip away from Will, and it became a waiting game to observe until there was none left.

Will sank his teeth into a fat grape and allowed his eyes to drift shut. It was juicier and sweeter than any grape he'd ever had in his entire life. The whole feast was a wonder of foods that he couldn't imagine. A cake that was sweet but didn't taste like raw sugar, chicken and duck and turkey that were cooked to absolute perfection in an array of different ways. The feast started abruptly but was not unwelcome. It was more like a buffet; Will had his plate piled a mile high, and he was certain that he would continue to return for more. He wasn't hungry, but no matter how much he ate, he never felt overly full.

"Prince Ruvyn, Your Highness," a small fairy said. She had skin that was tinged a bright shade of hot pink. Her eyes were wide and bright, and her chocolate hair fell about her shoulders delicately. "It is good to see you again. We were all apprehensive for you when you died." She bowed low to the ground when Will looked at her.

"You don't have to be so formal," Will said. "I didn't do anything so magnificent."

"But you are here, Your Highness!" another creature chimed in. He had long, spindly limbs and enormous dark eyes. His hair was closer to his scalp than some of the other fairies, wildly curling about his face. "That is the greatest gift you could bestow upon any of us, Your Highness."

“Thank you,” Will said. He could feel his cheeks flushing. He wasn’t used to so much attention or the praise of so many people. “You're too kind. Please, enjoy yourselves.”

The fairies repeatedly gave Will tiny bows and backed away from him. Each one wanted to speak to him, all baring various degrees of familiarity to Will. He couldn’t put his finger on it, so he let the niggling thoughts subside. Although they were friendly, they gave him a wide berth. Will's mother told him that he still smelled an awful lot like the human world. She knew that in no time, he would feel like his old self again.

Will rubbed at the tender spot on his throat. It didn’t hurt—in fact; nothing hurt in this place—but he had the faintest memory of a searing pain in his neck. He could hear a soft tune floating through the palace and the banquet hall, lulling him into a peaceful calm. Will felt at home here. He didn’t have any dogs, not in the way that humans would know them, but the animals in this world were just as friendly.

Although, Will would have to admit that it was strange to greet a dog only to have it greet you back.

Will ate and drank to his heart’s content until he was drowsy. The banquet was calming down as fairies and other creatures and animals filtered out of the palace and back to their homes. Will was told that in a few days, when all the dust settled, he would be allowed to wander the city and the towns that surrounded his new home. Will liked the idea of it, but he wasn’t sure if he could handle the overwhelming number of fairies that seemed to live in this place.

Will watched his father and mother, a few paces apart, walk away as if floating on air. They had no wings, but they seemed to fly gently everywhere they went. Will longed to be as graceful as them someday.

A dull plodding of hooves drew Will’s attention. In the extremely polished gold of the floor, Will could see the perfect reflection of himself and the faun. It smiled at Will in the reflection. Will smiled back.

“I hope you’re not too mad about me yelling at you in the labyrinth,” Will said. He looked up at Elnias, feeling a tad guilty about it. “I didn’t mean to.”

“I know that you meant me no harm, Prince Ruvyn,” Elnias purred. He bent his knees and bowed low to the ground. The gesture was familiar. “And I knew that I had to leave for you to complete your task.”

“At first I wasn’t going to,” Will said.

“Why is that, Your Highness?” Elnias asked. He stood up to his full height and gestured for Will to begin walking. Elnias tromped along just behind him, herding Will through the elaborate hallways and staircases. Out of the corners of his eyes, Will could swear he saw the light pink fairy following along. She was careful to remain as unseen as possible.

“I didn’t want to kill him,” Will admitted. “He was kind to me when I needed it most. He wasn’t scared of me. He treated me like a normal human.”

“Not all humans are as horrible as you would think, but you are not human, Prince Ruvyn,” Elnias corrected.

“I know that,” Will said. “But while I was on Earth, I was a human. You were the one to show me that I wasn’t.”

“Why did you change your mind, and try to kill him?”

Elnias was leading him up a spiraling staircase to a tall tower. Will stared up at the railing high above them. Was this where his room was?

“Because I didn’t want to let you down,” Will said.

Elnias gave a fond smile. At the top of the staircase, the building widened out. Elnias opened a door for Will and allowed him to enter. The room alone was twice the size of Will’s home in Wolf Trap. There were multiple of the dogs, going about and taking care of this or that. One pranced up to Will, accepting his pats with a friendly if raspy ‘hello, Prince Ruvyn!’. The dog trotted away after receiving his pats, his muddled orange fur striking Will as far too familiar. The world tilted to one side, and Will was close to falling over with it, but Elnias made sure to steady him before letting Will go.

After a moment, Will walked over to a gaping window and pushed it open. The warm breeze flooded Will's room, making him feel alive more than ever. Will closed his eyes and took it all in. Out in the streets, those that could not make it to the palace were still celebrating the return of the prince. Will could spot each bonfire, and could hear each different tune of a joyous song.

“You would never let me down, Your Highness,” Elnias promised.

“Thank you,” Will said.

“Come, it is time for you to rest now,” Elnias instructed. With a gentle hand on Will’s shoulder, the faun guided Will to his bed. It was plush and expansive, and had enough room for all four of the dogs there to clamber up and sprawl where they pleased.

Elnias left for a brief moment into another room, one that Will had used to bathe earlier, and returned with his hands clasped. Elnias opened his palms when he returned to Will. Perched on his soft skin were several different types of gems, although their color was more matte than Will would expect of gems.

“What are these?” Will asked. He glanced between Elnias’s hands and his face, but that same friendly smile was always there.

“They are to restore your magic,” Elnias said.

In the doorway to Will’s room, the pink fairy lingered. The longer that he looked at her, the harder it was to distinguish her face from the face of a pale girl.

“Who is she?” Will asked.

“A servant girl that you saved when you were young. She is very appreciative of all the things that you have done for her,” Elnias said. He brought his palm closer to Will. “Please take these now, Your Highness.”

Not wanting to be told more than twice, Will took the odd things from Elnias’s hand and popped them into his mouth. Elnias handed him a goblet of water, and Will swallowed it all down to chase away the sour taste that was left on his tongue.

“Will you be alright by yourself, my prince?” Elnias asked.

Will nodded. He was exhausted from a long day meeting others, and he stretched out on the bed. The fluffy orange dog scooted closer to him.

Elnias gave Will another bow before turning and leaving his bedroom and shutting the door after himself. Will gave Elnias a few moments before he sprang to his feet and ran over to the door as quietly as he could. Will cracked the door open half an inch, and peered out into the hallway.

Elnias was standing with the young fairy.

“Will he ever remember me?” she asked. Her voice was laced with concern. “It’s been months, Hannibal,” she whispered.

Will tried to understand the name that she addressed Elnias with. Hannibal? That wasn’t right. Elnias the faun was still standing there in the hall with the fairy, who was turning less pink by the second.

Elnias put a frail hand on her delicate shoulder. “It will take time,” he shushed. Elnias began to lead her away from the door.

The door hinges let out a soft squeak. Both of Elnias’s ears flicked up to attention. After a second of Will standing as still as a statue, Elnias continued.

“He suffered very serious head trauma, you know that, darling. It will take him some time, but we must be patient.”

Will felt bad that he couldn’t remember the fairy girl. He had no idea the impact he made on her life, as the memories were gone now.

“He was sick long before he fell down that well, it’s a miracle that he remembered any of us at all,” Elnias said. He was bringing the fairy towards the stairs.

Will lost part of their conversation as he waited for them to descend far enough down the stairwell. When he figured they were at least halfway down, Will creeped out of his room and to the staircase. They were at a second balcony, the young fairy looking upset at Elnias.

“He hasn’t recognized you more than twice this whole time. What if he’s gone for good?” she asked.

“Nonsense,” Elnias assured. “I won’t let you abandon him. Will needs us now more than ever.”

Will felt a stabbing ache go through his brain. Why had Elnias called him Will? Elnias never once called him Will.

“Now, go to bed,” Elnias urged.

The pink fairy gave Elnias one last pout before turning and going into her room. Elnias brushed his fingers across the fur on his chest, smoothing it down. He turned on his misshapen legs, and descended the stairs. Will peered over the railing, watching as Elnias’s body cracked and snapped as he changed. His legs grew shorter, and his fur was withering away. Before he was at the bottom of the stairs, Elnias became the monster. When he was at the bottom of the stairs, Hannibal turned his head up to Will and gave him a friendly smile.

“Good night, Will,” Hannibal called.

Will’s heart was threatening to beat right out of his throat. He turned and ran away, straight into his bedroom. Will collapsed onto his bed, much to the concern of the dogs. Hannibal hated dogs. It didn’t make sense. Will was dead. He was supposed to be dead and free of pain. Will curled onto his side, staring at the bedside table. Where once there had been a goblet and heavy jewels and gold, an alarm clock flickered into place. Next to it, a bright orange pill bottle prescribed for William Graham.

Will groaned and shook his head. The images melded together, hurting his eyes even more. Will turned onto his stomach, his face pressed into the soft pillow under him. He closed his eyes, counted to one hundred, and decided that his only option left was sleep

Chapter End Notes

I've rewritten this ending at least ten times and this is the only one where Will survived. Still not quite sure if I'm totally happy with it, but I'm gonna roll with it.

Thank you for sticking it out with me and making it through this fic to the end! It may not be as long as some of the Hannigram fics that are out there but hot DAMN this is the longest fic I've ever written and finished. Generally, my longest *finished* fics are about 5k-7k.

Hannibal's lullaby: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASLnzu-fvYc

End Notes

Come yell at/with me: @Nonmurdering

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!